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"I Know You're Family": An Exploration of the Enduring Relevance of a Pre-College Summer Bridge Program for Underrepresented Minoritized Students

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“I KNOW YOU’RE FAMILY”

AN EXPLORATION OF THE ENDURING RELEVANCE OF A PRE-COLLEGE SUMMER BRIDGE PROGRAM FOR UNDERREPRESENTED MINORITIZED STUDENTS

By

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For Julia –

You can do anything.

For player to be named later –

Can't wait to meet you.

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ABSTRACT

The proposed dissertation investigates the enduring relevance of a pre-college summer bridge program for underrepresented minoritized (URM) students who participate in the program as an entry point into a predominantly White institution (PWI). Using narrative inquiry and a critical frame, this dissertation uses individual interviewing and focus group data to understand the experiences of 10 URM summer bridge program participants at different points in their undergraduate academic career. For the purposes of this study, relevance of a summer bridge program for URM students refers to the ways in which deliberate and proactive programming helps students to develop academic and socio-emotional skillsets to resist stigma and persist through their undergraduate studies at a PWI. The research draws on critical race theory (CRT) as a theoretical framework and intends to inform more impactful strategies to support the retention of URM students at predominantly White institutions. The research also intends to center these experiences of the 10 URM students to illuminate systemic racism in higher education institutions with an eye towards deconstructing and dismantling it. These narratives will highlight the challenges faced by URM students at PWIs in the hopes of furthering racial equity in education

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

DEFINITION OF TERMS

I have elected to include a "Definition of Terms" at the beginning of the introduction in order to orient readers to some phrases and terminology that they might be unfamiliar with that are central to Critical Race Theory (CRT). I also want to clarify some of the racialized phenomena that URM students experience at PWIs in order for the reader to understand what is at stake in conducting research that intends to dismantle racism in higher education.

Counterstories

A methodological tenant of CRT in education (Ladson-Billings, 1998), counterstories balance and critique the majoritarian stories that dominate hegemonic discourse. Counterstories are defined by Gillborn (2006) as "autobiograph[ies] and… narrative[s] that have long characterized many minoritized cultures… and… build a powerful challenge to 'mainstream' assumptions" (p. 256).

Predominantly White institution (PWI)

Colleges or universities where students that identify as White account for the majority of the student population (Bourke, 2016).

Racial battle fatigue

Described by Smith, Yosso, and Solórzano (2006) as "the psychophysiological symptoms as a result of battling an accumulation of racial microaggressions on predominantly White… campuses" (p. 3) that can negatively impact underrepresented minoritized students.

Racial microaggression

First coined by Dr. Chester M. Pierce in 1970 and utilized in the field of psychology and psychiatry to refer to "subtle" put-downs, racial microaggressions were more recently defined by Sue et al. (2007) as the:

> brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group… these exchanges are so pervasive and automatic in daily conversations and interactions that they are often dismissed and glossed over as being innocent and innocuous (p. 273).

Although microaggressions can appear subtle, their cumulative effects can be significant and detrimental to the overall well-being of URM students.

Stereotype threat

Stereotype threat describes situations in which an individual is hyperaware of the negative stigma and stereotypes associated with their ethnic group, and this pressure (perceived or otherwise) can lead to chronic academic underperformance and social withdrawal (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Steele, 1997).

Summer bridge program

Summer bridge programs vary in terms of their focus and scope, but in general, they are either stand-alone nonprofits or programs at individual universities that are designed to facilitate an easier transition into undergraduate life for incoming students. Many are academically oriented and focus on preparing students for the rigors of higher education. Sometimes, the students who enroll in these programs are designated by the university as academically underprepared. Additionally, students who participate in summer bridge programs can come from underrepresented backgrounds (for example, they identify as a racial minority or are first generation or low-income), or they can also be focused on a particular area of academic interest (for example, a summer bridge program designed specifically for STEM majors).

Underrepresented minoritized student (URM)

The National Action Council for Minorities in Engineering (NACME) classifies the term "underrepresented minority student" (URM) as students in higher education who identify racially as African American, American Indian/Alaska Natives, and/or Latino; students from these racial backgrounds have historically been underrepresented as a college-going demographic. I have elected to change the acronym slightly to instead stand for "underrepresented *minoritized* student" to reflect what both Benitez (2010) and Lazarus Stewart (2013) refer to as a "process" (Benitez, p. 131), that "reflects an understanding of 'minority' status as that which is socially constructed in specific societal contexts" (Lazarus Stewart, p. 184). Through this amendment, the racial "minority" and "majority" is clarified as categorizations of race as a social construct.

BACKGROUND

While the numbers of underrepresented minoritized (URM) students enrolling in colleges and universities has been incrementally increasing in the past few decades, the numbers of URM students who then graduate from higher education is still disproportionately low. The National Center for Education Statistics reported that in 2014, 45.2% of full-time White students graduated college in four years, while only 21.4% of full-time Black-identified students, 31.7% of full-time Hispanic-identified students, and 22.8% of full-time American Indian / Alaskan Native graduated in four years. These statistics show that URM students are less likely to persist to college graduation than their White counterparts, and retention of these college students is a critical issue.

URM students across racial categories historically experience higher drop-out rates and lower rates of graduation (Tinto, 1997). By the time many URM students reach the point of entry into college, they have at some point in their academic careers experienced stigma related to their ethnic, racial, or socioeconomic background. Incidences of stereotype threat (Steele, 1997) or microaggressions during their K-12 educational experience perpetuate this stigma. Recent examples of racial microaggressions at colleges and universities in the news include a White college student at Yale University calling the police on a Black student who was asleep in her dorm lounge because the White student thought that the Black student was a trespasser (Wootson, 2018). Another recent example occurred when a professor at Suffolk University accused a Latina student of plagiarism when she used the word “hence” in an essay (Jaschik, 2016), stating that this word was “not your word”. In this instance, the professor considered that this word was too academic to be within the grasp of the student’s vocabulary. These are only two examples of near-daily incidences of harmful microaggressions that URM students

experience in higher education that are reported in the media. By the time many URM students enter into higher education, they have experienced what Smith, Ceja, Yosso, and Solórzano (2009) describe as *racial battle fatigue*, or the cumulative effect on their psychological well-being of constant exposure to racial macro- and microaggressions in the educational system by educators and peers alike.

A body of empirical research in the past few decades identifies specific components that affect the higher-than-average attrition rates of URM students in colleges and universities, especially at PWIs. One factor that impacts the persistence of URM students at PWIs is the overall campus racial climate. As demonstrated in the examples above at Yale University and Suffolk University, PWIs can feel unwelcoming to URM students as they face racism and bias from faculty, staff, administrators, and their fellow students, as well as in the physical spaces on campus or in the curriculum. For example, psychological phenomena such as stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Steele 1997) at PWIs can lead to academic underperformance and social withdrawal. This in turn can undermine a URM students' likelihood to persist in their undergraduate career (Cohen et al., 2006; Massey & Fischer, 2005; Steele, 1999; Walton & Cohen, 2007). In order to best support the persistence of URM students, college campuses ought to be spaces where the entire campus community is affirming of the different racial backgrounds, heritages, and cultural community wealth that URM students contribute (Patton, 2016; Santos et al., 2007; Yosso, 2005).

One such support is purposeful programming such as pre-college summer bridge programs, which can help URM students develop 'capital' that would mitigate the negative impact of racial battle fatigue and stereotype threat on their persistence and retention in higher education (Yosso, 2005). In this instance, I am drawing on Yosso's definition of 'capital' (or

"cultural capital" or "community cultural wealth" which refers to the knowledge that URM students bring from their communities into an educational space. Bridge programs can bolster academic preparation and self-efficacy as well as facilitate valuable community-building environments that support a URM students' sense of belonging (McCoy & Winkle-Wagner, 2015; Murphy et al., 2010; Robert & Thomson, 1994; St. John et al., 2014; Stolle-McCallister, 2011; Strayhorn, 2011; Suzuki et al., 2012). An overarching goal of summer bridge programs is to facilitate a student's transition from high school to a university setting; however, the impact of these bridge programs in helping URM students develop cultural capital to navigate PWIs can extend far beyond the summer prior to their matriculation.

Kinzie et al. (2008) found that early academic interventions and sustained attention specifically during the first year are critical for URM students' academic success. Summer bridge programs often provide students with the opportunity to take coursework the summer prior to their enrollment in college. This coursework allows URM students to begin developing relationships with faculty members and learning about academic resources on campus (such as the undergraduate research center, peer tutoring center, or writing center) in a way that is carefully facilitated, as opposed to having to seek out these resources on their own. Therefore, summer bridge academic programing that focuses on this critical juncture in a URM students' academic career can help them develop skillsets that will enable them to navigate challenging academic spaces (Einarsan & Matier, 2005; Guiffrida, 2002; Harper, 2013; Kinzie et al., 2008; Ovink & Veazey, 2009; Peteet et al., 2015; Tinto, 1997; Tinto, 2004; Zajacova et al., 2005).

Summer bridge programs can also cultivate a sense of community and belonging among URM students, which are critical factors that positively impact the likelihood of persistence (Booker, 2016; Carter, 2007; Cheng, 2004; Cooper, 2009; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Grier-Reed,

2013; Harper, 2013; Maldonado et al., 2005). Cooper's study (2009) explored how cultural affinity groups on college campuses "celebrate diversity while also fostering collective identities" (p. 5-6) and Patton (2006) described the impact of a Black Cultural Center on a predominantly White campus that not only provided students with a "sense of ownership, association, and belonging" but was also "reflective of the students' desire to have something on the campus that recognized and celebrated [their] culture" (p. 642-643). The research from both of these studies makes a case for extending the affirming impact of a racially diverse community peer group to pre-college summer bridge programming, where students from similar URM populations would have the opportunity to connect with each other in a supportive and collective environment. The development of peer groups within the structure of a summer bridge program can provide URM students with a sense of community at a PWI that might otherwise feel unwelcoming and hostile, and this sense of community can extend for the duration of their college career.

In summary, effective summer bridge programs can support URM students in developing forms of cultural capital that enables them to navigate successfully through their higher education career. Additionally, by providing important resources to URM students, helping them facilitate a social network, and laying a strong scholarly foundation, summer bridge programs can also refute the pervasive deficit narrative surrounding the underrepresentation of URM students in higher education.

PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this dissertation was to understand the relevance of summer bridge programs for URM students at a PWI (pseudonym: "Elmhill College") and how the

programming enabled their development of cultural capital with their Bridge Program community in order to help them navigate throughout their college career. I used interviews and focus groups seeking to understand how URM students make meaning of the academic and social programming that comprise the bridge program and how that programming was relevant in developing strategies to resist racialized stigma and contradiction at PWIs. In this dissertation, I explored how the experiences within a pre-college summer bridge program were relevant at different points in the URM students' career in higher education, both in regard to their academic performance as well as their connection to the campus community. The research questions that guide this study are:

1) What is the enduring relevance of the summer bridge program for URM students as they transition into and through a PWI?
2) In what ways did the summer bridge program support these URM students in developing strategies of *resistance* to address the challenges and contradictions of their experiences at one PWI?

The first research question sought to understand the trajectory of relevance of the summer bridge program for URM students. How did these students make sense of and use the tools, resources, and skillsets that they develop in the summer bridge program? How did that relevance evolve over the timeline of their undergraduate career?

The second research question aimed to put this trajectory of relevance within a larger CRT framework. The use of a CRT lens was necessary to provide a framework for the stories of URM students within the greater context of institutional racism (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005). The language here- specifically *resistance*- was drawn directly from CRT, and in particular, studies that explore the dynamics of campus racial climate at PWIs. In these studies, *challenges* and

contradictions often refers to the experiences of URM students at PWIs where the institution professes on a superficial level to value diversity and equity but falls short in making the meaningful institutional changes that follow through on this promise (Patton, 2016; Ranero, 2011). For example, a PWI could claim that "diversity" is a core value of its mission statement but fail to hire and retain faculty of color or to provide resources for the cultural affinity centers. These institutions may also continue to teach a White-dominated curriculum. These paradoxes can be particularly challenging to URM students who must navigate competing and contradictory messaging about their roles as students, campus leaders, and community members at PWIs (Harper et al., 2011; Harris et al., 2015; Patton, 2016). In contrast, strategies of *resistance* in CRT terminology connotes the ways in which URM students develop cultural capital that enables them to challenge phenomena such as stigma, stereotype threat, and racial battle fatigue at PWIs (Harper, 2006; Harper et al., 2011; Swim et al., 2003; Yosso, 2005). Therefore, my second research question provided a broader understanding of institutional racism in the storying of URM students' experiences at one particular PWI. Inherent in CRT is the notion of challenging dominant ideologies and the centrality of experiential knowledge; therefore, the research questions were designed to be expansive and iterative (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Despite social progress over the past fifty years in the post-Civil Rights era, race "remains a fundamental determinant in shaping the education quality for students of color in the United States" (Donner, 2016, p. 345). African American, Latino/a, and Native American students are more likely to attend under-resourced schools, be taught by inexperienced or

unqualified teachers, and are less likely to graduate from high school than their White counterparts (Aguirre, 2000; Harper et al., 2009). The K-12 majoritarian educational system privileges White norms, and often ignores or undermines the heritage of URM students and devalues their cultural capital. Further, the cultural strengths of URM students are often framed as deficits in the classroom, which results in an educational setting that, in essence, sets them up to fail (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Yosso, 2005). Their underrepresentation in higher education is an extension of these inequalities at the K-12 level. As stated above, this creates conditions for URM students to disengage from academics and their campus community.

In 2015, Black-identifying students comprised 15% of undergraduate student enrollment in the country, Hispanic-identifying students comprised 17% of undergraduate student enrollment, and Native American–identifying students comprised less than 1% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). These numbers are especially noteworthy given that the NCES projects that by 2027, the demographics of secondary students in this country will reach minority-majority status (i.e., White students will make up 45% of the secondary student population) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Additionally, the NCES reports that White students continue to have the highest four-year college graduation rates, trailed by Hispanic-identifying students, Black-identifying students, and Native American-identifying students. Despite efforts such as affirmative action policies or need-blind admissions practices at some of the most elite institutions, the system of higher education has historically privileged Whites (especially when considering programs like legacy admits, where children and other relatives of previously enrolled students can receive preferential treatment during the admission process). Further, there are still significant racial disparities in college student makeup due to the perpetuation of racist systems across all sectors (legal, economic, educational, etc.) in the US.

Without significant reform to the educational system, social and economic opportunity gaps for URM populations in the United States will continue to widen.

Recent quantitative research has measured the impact of pre-college summer bridge programs on traditional indicators of academic success, including student GPA, testing scores, and four-year / six-year graduation rates. For example, Barnett et al.'s (2012) study analyzed eight developmental summer bridge programs in the state of Texas; the findings suggested that participation in the program had minimal impact on persistence or course completion rates overall. However, participation in the programs did correlate with increased course completion rates in both math and writing. Similarly, Douglas and Attewell's (2014) study analyzed the impact of summer bridge programs with students who attended either community college or less selective four-year intuitions using national survey data. The authors found that students who attended bridge programs between high school and college have higher graduation rates than those who do not. These studies are examples of how quantitative analysis can tell a fragment of a story when understanding the relevance of complex summer bridge programs for URM students. Barnett et al.'s study (2012) solely analyzed undergraduate academic *outcomes* for the student participants, whereas Douglas and Attewell's (2014) study relied on national survey data and does not provide a nuanced understanding of markers of academic success. Most notably, both studies do not aggregate students by race, nor do they incorporate a critical framework, although Douglas and Attewell (2014) specifically note that in their analysis that some minoritized populations (including Black and Latino students) do tend to experience more of a positive impact on their graduation rate if they participated in a bridge program. While their research contributions are noteworthy, both studies defined 'academic success' using narrow parameters (e.g., six-year graduation rate, first year course completion rates) while ignoring

many of the other elements of bridge programming that contribute to a student's success in higher education (including community building, skill-building, familiarization with on-campus resources, leadership development, and mentorship). Studies also fail to account for the historical racial disparities in the higher education system. These elements are particularly critical to understand in order to help URM students persist at PWIs.

To address the dearth of scholarship in this area, my research focused on these 'other' elements by exploring the experiences of URM students who have participated in one particular summer bridge program at a PWI. In addition to their individual stories, I was interested in understanding how they made meaning of specific programmatic elements that they perceived as having impacted them as scholars and community members. I was also interested in the relevance of programmatic elements that helped them to navigate the challenging aspects of PWIs, and in particular, resist stigma, contradiction, and racism (both covert and overt) in White spaces. This study holds value for educational stakeholders who wish to understand the experiences of URM students at PWIs and empower them to resist hegemonic forces in academia and persist through their undergraduate career.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Chapter 1 provides background information that situates the current dissertation study in conversation with previous research. It provides historical context that explains the necessity of studying the experiences of URM students at predominantly White institutions with an eye towards helping the students develop cultural capital which will support their persistence and retention. Additionally, Chapter 1 outlines the research questions, situates them within CRT, and explains the significance of the study.

Chapter 2 is an overview of the literature related to this study, divided into three categories. First, I address the literature related to CRT and its application to the field of education. Second, I provide an overview of the literature regarding the history of URM students access to higher education, including national policies like affirmative action. Finally, I review literature that explores the factors that contribute to the persistence of URM students at PWIs, including literature that focuses on pre-college bridge programs. This section also includes a discussion of Yosso's forms of cultural capital (2005).

Chapter 3 details the research methods used in this study, including a brief literature review on my chosen research methods and a summary of the research design. Chapter 3 also describes site and participant selection, background information on the bridge program, and data collection and analysis. Finally, Chapter 3 includes a statement of researcher positionality.

Chapter 4 features individual profiles for the 10 participants in this study. The profiles give a more nuanced understanding of the 10 participants' lived experiences, including their academic and personal lives, as well as their racial identities.

Chapter 5 presents the findings for research question 1. The findings are categorized as five key themes that describe the *enduring relevance* of the Bridge Program for URM students.

Chapter 6 presents the findings for research question 2 as composite counterstory (or CCS), a CRT methodology that amalgams the stories of URM students into one single story (based on the premise that their voices have historically been excluded from traditional educational research). This counterstory foregrounds the students' voices and speaks to their experiences of racism at one particular PWI. It also illustrates how their participation in a bridge program enabled them to develop strategies of *resistance* against these experiences of racism.

Chapter 7 includes a discussion of the findings for both research questions. It also includes recommendations for practitioners based off of the findings, as well as directions for future research. Finally, Chapter 7 includes a brief discussion of the limitations of this study and a conclusion.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review is organized into several sections to provide context for this study. First, I will discuss the origins of CRT in legal studies as well as the central tenets of CRT. I will then transition into a discussion of CRT as it specifically pertains to the field of education. I will then include a summary of *counterstories* as a particular CRT methodology that centers the voices of URM populations as valid and worthy of research.

The second section will address the history of access to higher education for URM populations. First, I discuss the contentious history of affirmative action and how affirmative action policies have influenced diversity in higher education, as well as contributed to racial disparities at colleges and universities today. Additionally, I discuss how affirmative action policies have created and exacerbated some of the conditions that can make higher education environments feel racially unwelcome to URM students.

The third section addresses factors that influence retention and persistence for URM students at colleges and universities. This includes a discussion of Yosso's theory of community cultural wealth, which focuses on the unique forms of cultural capital that URM students develop either prior to or during their higher education experience that enable them to resist dominant hegemonic forces of racism. The third section also includes a brief review of the literature on pre-college summer bridge programs.

CRITICAL RACE THEORY

Origins of Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) informs my dissertation on the enduring relevance of a pre-college summer bridge program for URM students, as well as my secondary research question that seeks to understand how the bridge program enabled students to develop strategies of resistance within the context of a PWI. CRT has its origins in Critical Legal Studies (CLS), and it posits that Whites have historically been the beneficiaries of much legislation surrounding people of color; its proponents are, as noted by Bell (1995) "ideologically committed to the struggle against racism, particularly as institutionalized in and by the law" (p. 898).

Essential to the foundation of CLS is an understanding of Gramscian *hegemony* (1971), or the ways in which the dominant ruling class dictates the cultural perceptions, values, and beliefs of a society and perpetuates these as norms. As a theory, CLS questioned how legal doctrines uphold classist stratification based on the hegemonic notion that America is a meritocracy (Bell, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998). However, CLS fails to interrogate how racism also upholds these hegemonic structures, both in the law and the larger society (Brown & Jackson, 2013; Delgado & Stefancic, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Tate, 1997). Essentially, CLS failed to incorporate the intersectionality of class-based racism and/or race-based classism (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Therefore, CRT grew out of CLS in that it specifically examined the hegemonic notion of American meritocracy as it relates to race. In the case of CRT, Gramscian *hegemony* specifically reflects *White supremacist values*, or the beliefs in Whiteness and White cultural values as both the default and the ideal.

Principles of Critical Race Theory

CRT embraces narrative and storytelling (Bell, 1995) and the theme of "naming one's own reality" in order to "communicate the experience and realities of the oppressed, a first step on the road to justice" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006, p. 18-19). CRT operates on the primary understanding that racial inequity is a fact in mainstream US society, and it centers the importance of race and racism in the experiences of people of color; these experiences must be brought to the "foreground of academe" (Minikel-Lacocque, 2013, p. 438).

In conversation with previous CRT scholarship (and in particular, CRT in education), Solórzano (1997) has identified five central tenets to CRT; first, the intercentricity of race and racism, or the ways in which racism intersects with other 'isms' (sexism, classism, etc.) to compound oppression or marginalization (what Crenshaw (1991) refers to as "intersectionality"); second, the challenge to the dominant ideology (or the hegemonic / White supremacist ideology); third, a Freireian (1970), liberatory commitment to social justice; fourth, the centrality of experiential knowledge, or the valuing of lived experience as well as methodologies that are considered 'on the margins', such as storytelling; and fifth, an interdisciplinary perspective which roots an understanding of race and racism in both a historical and a contemporary frame (Smith et al., 2009). CRT is therefore appropriate for this dissertation because I seek to understand the experiences of a group of URM students navigating a predominantly White education system.

Critical Race Theory in Education

When specifically applied to education, CRT is an analytical lens that can be used to assess the disconnect experienced by students from historically minoritized racial backgrounds. Often, URM students are fed the myth of equality of opportunity while they themselves are

acutely aware of their systemic oppression within the university (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2015; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Solórzano et al (2000) explain:

> The critical race theory [as a] framework for education… simultaneously attempts to foreground race and racism in the research as well as challenge the traditional paradigms, methods, texts, and discrete discourse on race, gender, and class by showing how these social constructs intersect to impact on communities of color (p. 63).

CRT in education also more broadly addresses the paradoxes and contradictions (specifically related to Research Question 2) of the ways in which many universities purport to value diversity while still upholding White hegemonic structures both in and out of the classroom. As Smith et al. (2009) remind us, the "CRT lens exposes some of the ways racism on college and university campuses has become more subtle but no less pervasive as compared with the racially tumultuous 1960s" (p. 663). By naming these contradictions, CRT in education not only centers the voices of minoritized populations but legitimizes their experiences.

This dissertation also draws from CRT research that provides a more holistic view into the various phenomena that many URM students experience both on campus and prior to their matriculation into college. An example of this phenomena could include Steele's (1997) research on the cumulative effects of 'stereotype threat' as it pertains to URM students in predominantly White educational spaces who experience "rumors of inferiority" and dissociate from the 'domain' of schooling. Steele (1997) writes, "If the poor school achievement of ability-stigmatized groups is mediated by disidentification, then it might be expected that among the ability-stigmatized, there would be a disassociation between school outcomes and overall self-esteem" (p. 623). In response to this, CRT proposes the concept of *resistance*, or the ways in which URM students have developed mechanisms and skillsets to counter this stigma and disidentification. CRT in education also enables us to understand the forms of cultural capital that summer bridge program participants have developed which can positively impact their

experience in college (Bourdieu, 1986; Yosso, 2005). What social habits, familial / community influences, and cultural ways of knowing will they draw on in their experience in higher education? And further, how does this capital (which deliberately stands in opposition to traditional, hegemonic, White forms of cultural and social capital) enable them to resist a challenging or hostile campus climate at a PWI?

In this particular study, I rely on the stories of URM students to explore the discrepancies and conflicts surrounding the Bridge Program's origins, programming, and impact within an educational CRT framework. For example, the pre-college summer bridge program is designed to give URM students a strong social and academic foundation when they begin their undergraduate career. One could argue that this utilizes an asset-based, social justice-oriented approach to help URM students develop and strengthen particular skillsets in support of their persistence throughout their college career and beyond. However, at the particular PWI examined in this study, the URM student participants forego the 'traditional' acceptance into the college and instead, their acceptance is contingent upon successful completion of the pre-college summer bridge program. Additionally, many of the student participants come from under-resourced schools in a nearby school district with lower-than-average testing scores and college-going percentages. Therefore, one could also argue that the pre-college summer bridge program acts as a barrier to college acceptance and is deficit-oriented because its mission communicates that these students are lacking and need to be fixed to be successful at this PWI. Therefore, they might be considered unworthy of 'traditional' acceptance without the support of the bridge program.

CRT Counterstories as Representations of Racialized Experiences

CRT emphasizes the importance of *counterstories* as a form of "experiential knowledge" that is "legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination" (Smith et al. 2009, p. 663) when conducting educational research. Counterstories in CRT are both a methodology and a theoretical approach to research (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) which "… foreground race and racism in all aspects of the research process" (p. 24). By serving as both a method and a framework, a counterstory guides the ways in which one conducts research while also being a product of the research in itself. The goal of counterstories is to "… document the persistence of racism and other forms of subordination, voices from the margins, become the *voices of authority* in the researching and relating of our own experiences" (Martinez, 2014, p. 65, emphasis added). Additionally, both Solórzano &Yosso (2001) and Martinez (2014) emphasize that in educational research, a counterstory must stand in opposition to a dominant narrative that either 'others' people of color or else it equates historically oppressed populations with 'bad' and White, upper-middle SES populations as 'good'; Solórzano & Yosso refer to this as the 'majoritarian story', while Martinez calls it a 'stock story'.

A CRT counterstory can take on a variety of forms. Merriweather Hunn et al. (2016) identify three different types of counterstories, which include personal stories, other peoples' stories or narratives, and composite counterstories. Merriweather Hunn et al. specify that composite counterstories "represent an accumulation, a gathering together, and a synthesis of numerous individual stories" while, by contrast, the telling of a singular person's story "...begins as a particular, individual experience [and] gains validation through the act of re-telling" (p. 244). Many counterstories that have appeared in peer-reviewed journals in the last two decades of CRT research have been modeled as composite counterstories, which amalgamate the stories

of people of color into one comprehensive narrative (e.g., Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Patton & Catching, 2009; Cook & Dixson, 2013; Griffin et al., 2014; Hubain et al., 2016). The particular composite counterstory in this dissertation illustrates a hypothetical lived experience that borrows from many individual narratives.

In the next section, I discuss one of the more contentious national policies around access to higher education: affirmative action. In dominant hegemonic discourse, affirmative action policies are an affront to the opportunities presented in the American meritocracy. The notion that affirmative action policies give URM people an "advantage" in accessing higher education spaces that have historically been unavailable to them directly contrasts the notion that America is egalitarian and that all populations have equal opportunity to succeed if they simply try hard enough. But as I point out, affirmative action policies have historically supported some of the most critical legal decisions in the increased representation of URM students in higher education, and by contrast, the states that have done away with affirmative action policies have seen a swift and immediate drop in enrollment of URM college students. This section is meant to provide greater context around the narrative of URM student *access* to higher education, as well as provide more nuance to embedded racism in higher education.

ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION FOR URM STUDENTS: AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

Fullinwider (2001) defines affirmative action as "positive steps taken to increase the representation of women and minorities in areas of employment, education, and culture from which they have been historically excluded" (p. 1). Fullinwider's definition further discusses the central debate of affirmative action: "When those steps involve *preferential* selection—

selection on the basis of race, gender, or ethnicity- affirmative action generates intense controversy" (p. 1).

History of Affirmative Action

Since the origins of the term "affirmative action" in the mid 1960s, significant criticism has been leveraged at this policy for being 'preferential' and therefore unconstitutional, though it is one of the most impactful policies in terms of increasing the numbers of URM students in higher education. Affirmative action admission policies in higher education often garner criticism for 'reverse racism', or unfairly benefitting URM applicants at the expense of White majority students. Many opponents of affirmative action also argue that in the time that has passed since *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Civil Rights Era, the United States has moved past its history of racial exclusion and subordination and is now squarely in a post-racial age, where the overall merit of an applicant should be the only consideration for their admissions to higher education. Because of their contentiousness, affirmative action policies have been largely unsuccessful in increasing the numbers of URM students that access (and graduate from) higher education institutions, especially elite higher education institutions (Arcidiacono, Espenshade, Hawkins & Sander, 2015). Moreover, the debate around the effectiveness of affirmative action is in some ways responsible for the often-unwelcome conditions that many URM students face at PWIs because their fundamental 'belonging' is called into question.

The origin of affirmative action as a government policy was established with President Johnson's Executive Order 11246 in 1965, which ensured equal opportunity in the workplace regardless of race, creed, color, or national origin; in the late 60s and early 70s, these protections were extended to higher education. The intentions of Executive Order 11246 were to address "past inequalities and [provide] opportunities for individuals from groups that had been victims

of prejudice and discrimination" (Niemann & Maruyama, 2005, p. 407). Much of the groundswell for this redressing was established in the context of the Civil Rights era. Post-Executive Order 11246, colleges and universities began to implement specific admissions policies that accounted for racial and ethnic identity in order to mitigate the effects of chronic minority underrepresentation in the American higher education system.

Prior to Executive Order 11246, the higher education system in America had deep roots in exclusionary policies that are both racist and sexist. At its origins in the 18th century, American higher education was a privilege that was reserved for White wealthy landowners. The establishment of land-grant institutions through the Morrill Act of 1862, which intended to bring higher education to the working masses through studies in agriculture and mechanical arts, did not extend these opportunities to Black people, who were still an enslaved population at the time of its implementation. Post-Civil War, a major movement to educate the newly freed enslaved included the establishment of the country's first HBCUs (historically Black colleges and universities) under the second Morrill Act of 1890. Despite the "separate but equal" terminology of *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896, the opportunity for minorities to pursue higher education in any context represented a significant advance in racial justice (Harper et al., 2009). However, the legal establishment of the "separate but equal" clause meant that Black people had unequal access to a *well-resourced* education. These inequities persisted until the desegregation of public schools in 1954's *Brown v. Board of Education*, but equal protection did not extend to colleges and universities until the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Affirmative action as an executive policy was established one year later.

Almost a century passed between the freedom of enslaved Black people post-Civil War and the establishment of the Civil Rights Act, during which millions of URM students sought to

improve their situation by pursuing the opportunities inherent with a college degree, but they were routinely, systemically, and legally denied these opportunities for higher education. One of the first landmark legal cases that specifically addressed higher education affirmative action admissions policies was *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* in 1978. The Supreme Court's ruling was that, while it was unconstitutional for an institution of higher education to use specific racial quotas in their admissions policies, it *was* constitutional to consider a student's minority status as one of the components in evaluating them for admission. Additionally, the ruling from *Regents v. Bakke* established the *diversity rationale* or that "the educational benefits of diversity as a *compelling governmental interest*… [provide] the primary justification for affirmative action" (Gurin et al., 2002, p. 331).

In 1996's *Hopwood v. University of Texas*, the Fifth Circuit essentially counteracted Justice Powell's opinion from *Bakke* that posed racial diversity as "essential to the quality of higher education" (1978). The ruling in *Hopwood* stated instead that "... the use of race… simply achieves a student body that looks different. Such a criterion is no more rational on its own terms than would be choices based upon the physical size or blood type of applicants" (*Hopwood v. University of Texas,* 1996, p. 950). The anti-affirmative action ruling in *Hopwood* and the banning of considerations of race in college admissions in the state of Texas would result in a detrimental impact on the racial diversity at Texas's largest public and private institutions for almost a decade, until the Supreme Court's rulings of *Gratz v. Bollinger* and *Grutter v. Bollinger* in 2003. The Supeme Court accepted certiorari because of a split in the federal circuits (*Hopwood v. Texas*, 78 F.3d 932 (5th Cir, (1996) and *Smith v. University of Washington Law School* 23 F.3d 1188 (9th Cir. 2000)) over this important issue.

Today, despite the Supreme Court case rulings that have deemed diversity a "compelling state interest" and upheld the legality of specific affirmative action policies in higher education admissions, eight states currently have banned affirmative action outright through voter referendums. California is one of the most notorious states for having passed Proposition 209 in 1996 that banned all state government entities from utilizing race as a consideration in areas of public education, despite having one of the largest and most diverse populations in the entire country. The aftermath of Proposition 209 on the demographics of student enrollment at California's top universities were highly damaging. There was a significant drop in enrollment of URM students at California's top public schools (and in particular, Black students) in the several years following Proposition 209, and several research studies have shown that California schools have faced historically low levels of minority student enrollment ever since (Hinrichs, 2012; Howell, 2010; Hurtado, 2005; Rendón et al., 2005).

Diversity in higher education: The compensatory argument

In his 1965 speech at Howard University, President Lyndon B. Johnson argued:

> You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race, and then say 'You are free to compete with all the others' and still justly believe that you have been completely fair (Johnson, 1965).

Despite social progress of the past 50 years in the post-Civil Rights era, Donner (2016) notes that race "remains a fundamental determinant in shaping the education quality for students of color in the United States" (p. 345). Yet, opponents of affirmative action policies argue that we have reached a post-racial age where equality of opportunity crosses all racial lines, and as such, candidates for higher education should be evaluated on merit alone without any consideration towards their racial background.

By contrast, Harper et al. (2009) argue of historical mandates such as *Brown v. Board of Education*:

> … [though they] allowed African American students to attend PWIs in larger numbers, the doors to these institutions were neither instantly nor easily opened… race was used to indicate intellectual inferiority, promote their exclusion from White institutions, and ultimately keep [minorities] from disturbing the white status quo in higher education (p. 404).

The compensatory argument for higher education states that there are still significant racial disparities in the college student makeup because of the perpetuation of racist systems across all sectors of America. Affirmative action can potentially correct historical injustices and calls for government policies that will extend educational opportunities to URM populations that have historically been excluded.

In essence, the compensatory argument is an argument for social justice. However, the concept of remedying past wrongdoings by enacting policies that expand educational access has been widely critiqued for unfairly blaming contemporary society. Some opponents of affirmative action argue that White applicants should not be unfairly 'penalized' for the actions of their ancestors by not receiving the same 'preferential' treatment as their minority counterparts- i.e., reverse racism (Aguirre, 2000; Garrison-Wade & Lewis, 2004). Ideally, college admissions would be color-blind and would evaluate each individual candidate on their intellectual and extracurricular merits alone. Yet, as has been previously stipulated, URM students are less likely to pursue a four-year college degree than their White counterparts for a host of reasons (Arcidiacono et al., 2015; Bailey et al., 2005; Crisp & Nunez, 2014). What are the outcomes when the college prospects of URM students are based on "merit" alone- which includes such measures as the SAT or ACT testing scores, where minority applicants disproportionately score lower than their White counterparts (Reeves & Halikias, 2017) without consideration for the

systemic inequalities that can hinder their opportunities in the secondary system? In states that have specifically enacted these kinds of merit-based admissions policies, statistics have demonstrated how detrimental these parameters can be to the expanded enrollment of minoritized students in higher education.

Fundamentally, White students have long been the beneficiaries of a higher education system that was historically built for them (Ladson-Billings,1998). Their job prospects, post-baccalaureate opportunities, and lifetime earnings have been greatly enhanced by the fact that the pursuit of higher education degree has been an achievable option for far longer than most minoritized populations in this country. However, despite this imbalance, the compensatory philosophical basis was largely axed in the *Regents v. Bakke* ruling. By establishing the use of racial background as simply a "plus" factor in the holistic consideration of a student's admission, *Bakke* negated the concept that a student from a historically underrepresented racial minority was enough of a compelling interest to warrant outright racial quotas in current admission practices. However, as Rhoads et al. (2005) note, several of the dissenting opinions in *Bakke* actually supported a reparations-based argument for affirmative action policy, seeing these policies as "necessary… in fulfilling the social contract with minority groups" as opposed to "a violation of the equal protection clause" (p. 200). Regardless of the ample historical evidence of systemic racism in higher education, *Regents v. Bakke* effectively removed the compensatory argument for affirmative action policies from the legal discourse in the years to come. Moreover, this fundamentally quashed any philosophical argument for higher education reparations to mitigate historical wrongdoings and disenfranchisement.

Diversity in higher education: A "compelling state interest"

In *Regents v. Bakke,* Justice Powell's opinion argued for the educational value of diversity and subsequently, the diversification of higher education as a 'compelling state interest'. He concluded that expanding the range of student viewpoints through a more diverse student body would create an educational environment of greater introspection, speculation, and investigation, which would enhance the academic experiences of all students enrolled (Moses & Chang, 2006). Twenty-five years later, the defense for *Grutter v. Bollinger* in 2003 reaffirmed the importance of the *diversity rationale*, which justified the University of Michigan's use of race-conscious admissions practices. The diversity rationale is associated with what Niemann and Maruyama (2005) point to as "democracy outcomes, including greater social concern and humanitarian values of White students who attended more diverse campuses, and benefits from learning about differences in perceptions of reality that come from engagement on diverse campuses" (p. 412). Instead of focusing on the ways in which affirmative action policies are compensatory, or meant to remedy past injustices, *diversification* describes how concerted efforts to diversify the student population in higher education can contribute to a more socially just and equitable society in the future.

A significant body of empirical research has focused on the ways in which diversity in education supports and deepens student learning (Gurin et al., 2002; Niemann & Maruyama, 2005). As Niemann & Maryuama (2005) argue, diversity "fosters the examined life, prepares students for citizenship, enhances education for economic and scientific progress, and by breaking down barriers, advances a chief purpose of higher education" (p. 411). Additionally, achieving a critical mass of minority students in an institution through race-conscious admissions policies can help dispel stereotypes and monolithic assumptions previously held by non-minority

White students. In *Cultivating Humanity*, Nussbaum (1997) discusses the importance of educational curriculum that not only emphasizes critical introspection and self-examination, but actively cultivates the ability to participate as a democratic citizen in society. As Nussbaum states "We do not fully respect the humanity of our fellow citizens- or cultivate our own- if we do not wish to learn about them, to understand their history, to appreciate the differences between their lives and ours" (p. 295).

In *Gratz v. Bollinger* and *Grutter v. Bollinger*, Lee Bollinger, the then-president of the University of Michigan, established a legal argument that emphasized the importance of racial diversity in higher education settings to justify the University's use of affirmative action, instead of trying to defensively diminish the University's use of race-conscious admissions practices. A University's defense of *diversification* as a valued institutional mission was, up until that point, largely unprecedented. Bollinger stated that:

> … race is a significant factor in American life, and that significance gives it salience in an educational setting. That is, it is intimately related to our educational goals… [and] there are no other ways that we can do this acceptably than by using race as a factor in admissions (O'Neil Green, 2004, p. 738).

In fact, in preparing for their defense, the University of Michigan launched a number of empirical educational research studies that intended to establish the pedagogical and theoretical advantages of racial diversity in education.

In his argument for *Regents v. Bakke,* Justice Blackmun wrote "In order to get by racism, we must first take into account race. There is no other way." Through Blackmun's dissent, we understand that higher education is not a vacuum that is removed from larger societal forces, and colleges and universities cannot be effective if they separate themselves from "the individuals and institutions with which the law interacts" and if they are "removed from the interplay of ideas and the exchange of views from which the law is concerned" (*Regents v. Bakke*, 1977, p.

30). The diversity rationale is, at its core, educationally-based as opposed to reparations-based. The diversity rationale for affirmative action admissions policies ostensibly does not focus on the benefits to one particular demographic (as in, minoritized students that will suddenly be advantaged by race-based admission policies), but instead on the ways in which all students can benefit from a racially diverse educational setting and the representation of students from a wide range of backgrounds and demographics.

However, if we examine the rhetoric of the diversity rationale, we notice the underscoring of White hegemonic values. The diversity rationale describes the presence of URM students as a compelling state interest *in order to mitigate the prejudices of White students*. Indeed, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor's majority ruling stated that law school's use of race as a factor in admissions decisions stemmed from "a compelling interest in obtaining the educational benefits that flow from a diverse student body" (*Grutter v. Bollinger,* 2003, 15-16*).* Yet, in a society where public education is still deeply segregated, the flow of educational benefits is one-directional. White students may have never had to interact with URM students for the duration their K-12 education, but URM students have spent their entire lives navigating systems in a country where Whiteness is both the default and the norm. Put simply, a more diverse academic setting provides White students an opportunity to learn from their fellow URM students, but URM students already know about Whiteness. Trepczynski (2020) identified this as resulting from:

> … white people's general lack of fluency around race, especially their own. White people often don't understand that they are as "raced" as any person of color. They can see that a black person, for example, is deeply embedded in what we call "race", and lives a life impacted at nearly all levels by race. Indeed, this idea is almost axiomatic. But they often can't draw the same conclusion about themselves, or white supremacy, which is how they came to be raced in the first place (p. 3).

Based on Trepczynski's analysis, the diversity rationale presupposes the notion that increased URM student enrollment at PWIs is only a compelling state interest if it also advances White students' knowledge in how to be more democratic participants in our society.

With the debate surrounding affirmative action as a backdrop, the argument for programs that support the enrollment and persistence of URM students at PWIs becomes much clearer. Even though educational affirmative action policies have been dubiously successful in terms of increasing enrollment of URM students, they are still one of the only policies that has attempted to redress the historical gatekeeping of URM populations from higher education. Anti-affirmative action policies, by contrast, send a clear message that the United States is a post-racial meritocracy and despite the historical legacies of slavery, segregation, and racism, higher education should not 'favor' particular populations over others. By virtue of these policies alone, higher education can feel hostile and unattainable for many URM students. Therefore, pre-college summer bridge programs can serve a vital function in transitioning URM students into higher education.

PERSISTENCE AND RETENTION OF URM STUDENTS

In the following section, I outline some of the key factors that influence the persistence and retention of URM students at higher education institutions. It is critical to understand these factors given the historic under-enrollment of URM students, especially in four-year institutions. As many bridge programs are created as "interventions" to what many colleges and universities shortsightedly deem as a lack of academic preparation for URM students, one must understand the skillsets that the bridge program is trying to implement and bolster. This section will provide more context into how summer bridge programs can foster the development of these factors and

skillsets for URM students. I will focus in particular on academic self-efficacy and skill-building, sense of belonging and community, and the impact of campus racial climate on the persistence of URM students. I will then focus on some of the literature that describes the impact of bridge programs on building these skillsets. Finally, I include a discussion of Yosso's community cultural wealth (2005), which frames how the development of skillsets and community can help URM students develop strategies of resistance to move through PWIs.

Academic self-efficacy and skill-building

A significant body of empirical research has emerged in the past few decades that affects the higher-than-average attrition rates of URM students in colleges and universities, especially at PWIs. One key area of inquiry has focused on the ways in which a URM student's likelihood to persist depends on their levels of academic support and preparation. As Kinzie et al. (2008) found, "The academic performance of new students can be impacted the most through early interventions and sustained attention during their first year" and "faculty teaching first-year courses have the greatest opportunity to shape student behaviors in terms of time on task and engagement" (p. 30).

This body of research points to the importance of URM students developing *academic self-efficacy*, or the belief that an individual has agency to produce desired academic outcomes (Bandura, 2008; Bandura & Schunk, 1981). Academic self-efficacy can be supported through mentor/mentee relationships with faculty members, being involved in research projects or taking interesting and engaging courses, or the use of academic resources on campus such as the writing center, and Zajacova et al. (2005) note that "they affect college outcomes by increasing students' motivation and persistence to master challenging academic tasks and by fostering the efficient use of acquired knowledge and skills" (p. 679).

In addition to the development of academic self-efficacy, the development of practical academic skill-sets can aid in the persistence of URM students in higher education. These skills can include organizing an academic paper, time management, or learning how to read a syllabus. As Strayhorn (2011) asserts, both the development of one's concrete academic skills and the *belief* that one has autonomy in their own educational growth and attainment are critical to the success of URM students in higher education. Similarly, Perna & Thomas' (2006) framework for student success pairs academic preparation with educational aspirations as the two pillars of college readiness. Regardless of the framing, it is clear that both the academic practical skills as well as the belief in one's own academic growth must be present in tandem; these two are strong predictors of URM student persistence for the duration of their college career (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Kinzie et al., 2008; Ovink & Veazey, 2009; Perna & Thomas, 2006; Strayhorn, 2011).

Zajacova et al. (2005) point out that unfortunately, "problems associated with lower academic performance and higher attrition are disproportionately concentrated among… minority students" (p. 78). This is supported by data from the National Center for Education Statistics that found that Black-identifying students are more likely to take remedial coursework than their White counterparts (Casselman, 2014). Additionally, a 2017 article from the Brookings Institute analyzed average SAT scores of high school students aggregated by race and found that the scores for Black students and Latino/a students fall far below their White and Asian counterparts (average math SAT scores of 428 for Black students and 457 for Latino/a students, as compared to 534 for White students and 598 for Asian students) (Reeves & Halikias, 2017). The article also states that these racial gaps are similar for ACT scores. While the SAT score is not the defining component of a student's academic abilities, it is one important metric

that colleges use in admissions to evaluate whether or not they believe a student will be academically successful at their institution. These statistics are also reflected in Strayhorn's (2014) study using Education Longitudinal Study data to assess factors that influence college readiness among URM students. His results found that URM students were found to be less "college ready" than their White and Asian counterparts. Finally, Harper's (2009) study on the experiences of 143 Black male collegians found that "low expectations from their K-12 teachers follow them into college, thus they often find themselves overwhelmed by the academic rigor of their courses and insufficiently prepared" (p. 700). The findings from these studies all suggest that URM students are often considered "academically at-risk" before they even enroll in college as a result of gatekeeping and systemic under resourcing in the K-12 system. If higher education institutions are not intentional about creating programming and policies that disrupt this narrative and focus on URM students' academic assets and capabilities, it is likely that these deficit frameworks will have a negative impact on the students' academic performance and make them more vulnerable to attrition.

Sense of belonging

Another key component that influences the persistence of URM students in college is their ability to feel that they are a part of the campus community, or their *sense of belonging*. This can be cultivated both formally through established campus support services, or informally, through mentor/mentee relationships and peer networks. The importance of the development of a sense of belonging through involvement in campus community has been widely documented through both quantitative and qualitative studies (Booker, 2016; Carter, 2007; Cheng, 2004; Cooper, 2009; Dennis et al., 2005; Gonzales et al., 2015; Grier-Reed, 2013; Harper, 2009). Cheng's (2004) quantitative analysis found that students' sense of community is closely

associated with their feelings of being treated in a caring way, valued as an individual, and accepted as a part of the group. Cooper (2009) utilized both Astin's (1984) and Tinto's (1997) concepts of developmental involvement to chart a student's sense of belonging through affiliation with one or more campus groups. Dennis et al. (2005) discussed the significance of peer mentoring networks in shaping a student's motivation to persist, as well as supporting academic adjustment to the campus community. Guiffrida's (2003) study on the impact of African American student organizations on the persistence of African American students at a mid-sized predominantly White institution identified these peer groups as places of comfort to commune with peers from similar backgrounds and cultures.

The sense of belonging on a campus community is even more critical for URM students because they may feel a sense of alienation from their White peers on predominantly White campuses. Harper's (2009) study found that "[an] inability to integrate into the campus because it is often so unlike their home environments is one of the main factors commonly used to explain Black student attrition" (p. 700). A later study by Grier-Reed (2013) explored how an informal networking group that was developed among Black college students served as a therapeutic intervention for the Black students in an otherwise predominantly White space. Grier-Reed identified some main therapeutic factors that students experienced in this networking group, including cohesion, acceptance, connectedness, validation, and empowerment. She notes that:

> … a network in which Black faculty, staff, and… students come together to guide and support Black undergraduates in problem solving and making sense of their college experience can help alleviate the perpetuation of maladaptive strategies that inhibit successful navigation of the college terrain… [and can] be linked to higher levels of social integration and social support (2013, p. 172).

PWIs can already feel racially hostile to URM students, and if the students are unable to connect with a peer group or find a strong sense of community, their likelihood to persist at that institution may be in jeopardy.

For URM students, the development of a sense of campus community should be cultivated in a way that frames their cultural heritage as a strength (Yosso, 2005) as opposed to be mitigated or assimilated. González (2000) critiqued Tinto's model of student retention in that it emphasizes the 'integration' of URM students into the campus community. González noted that Tinto's model of integration actually called for "an annihilation of one's culture of origin in order to assimilate" (2000, p. 87) and argued for a new framework of minority student participation where URM students could connect with other peers and form community that incorporates and celebrates their cultural capital, as opposed to 'annihilating' it. Peer networks of students from similar racial backgrounds, as well as formalized campus clubs such as multicultural affinity groups can all serve this important purpose in the shaping of a cultural community. Smith et al. (2009) counter specifically that Tinto's model ignores the agency of URM populations to navigate these harmful spaces and create their own sources of community to facilitate belonging. Smith et al. (2009):

> Though certainly injured by racial microaggressions, Latinas/os do not consider themselves helpless victims… [instead forming] communities that represent and reflect the cultural wealth of their home communities. In academic and social counterspaces, Latinas/os foster skills of critical navigation between multiple worlds of home and school, academia, and community. These students' experiences remain under researched and, indeed, unaccounted for in Tinto's (1993) model (p. 680).

In summary, the establishment of a sense of belonging among URM students at PWIs- cultivated through community-building activities, points of cultural connection, and the establishment of peer groups – is as critical to their persistence as the development of academic self-efficacy and skill-sets. Moreover, the URM students should feel a sense of belonging that celebrates their communities and cultural heritage, as opposed to feeling that they must assimilate into White campus culture in order to belong.

Campus racial climate

Another key factor that influences the persistence of URM students in college is the overall campus racial climate. In order to best support the persistence of URM students, campus communities must be spaces where faculty, staff, administrators, and fellow students are affirming of different racial backgrounds, heritages, and the social capital and cultural community wealth that URM students contribute (Santos et al., 2007; Yosso, 2005). As mentioned previously, many URM students experience psychological phenomena such as stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Steele 1997). Additionally, they can experience racial battle fatigue, which Smith, Allen, and Danley (2007) describe as the impact of "constant physiological, psychological, cultural, and emotional coping with racial microaggressions in less-than-ideal and racially hostile or unsupportive environments" (p. 555) or racial misandry, all of which are extraordinarily damaging for their likelihood to remain at the institution. Smith et al.'s (2007) study specifically focused on the impact of campus environments on Black males and analyzed how campus climates that were "subjectively reported as unsupportive and racially hostile, lead to alienation, dissatisfaction, academic disidentification, disengagement, and blocked academic aspirations for many Black males" (p. 552). The overall campus racial climate

can either mitigate these effects or it can augment them to the detriment of URM students' persistence and retention.

Santos et al.'s study (2007) amassed interview data from 103 participants at two ethnically diverse colleges in Southern California for the purposes of understanding how campus climate impacts college adjustment among ethnically diverse students. The authors identified a number of factors that are a part of the overall campus climate that could support college adjustment, which included multicultural contacts in all levels of administration, interethnic connectedness across affinity groups, multicultural curriculum that deviates from the White majoritarian discourse, and the presence of anti-discrimination policies and cultural sensitivity/bias training. All of these factors point to the significance of *validation*, or what Rendón (1994) describes as the factors that help URM students believe "in their innate capacity to learn and become successful college students" (p. 36).

In her 1994 study, Rendón rejects a pervasive stereotype in higher education, which associates URM students with the deficit label of being "at-risk" (i.e., less likely to persist through their college career) and instead notes that "even the most vulnerable nontraditional students can be transformed into powerful learners through in-and out-of-class academic and/or personal validation" (p. 37). Gonzales et al.'s (2015) study explored the impact of a culturally and linguistically responsible learning community model on Latinx students concluded that campus climate negatively impacted student attrition, which underscores Rendón's findings. Gonzales et al. write,

> We noticed that very few of our students were involuntary departures resulting from poor academic performance, despite the perception of colleagues within our institution to the contrary…. it is the internalization of… negative stereotypes, labels and criticisms by underrepresented low-income, and first-generation students… that often serve as the key obstacles to student success (p. 229).

Gonzales et al.'s (2015) findings show that appropriate programming and support—racial affinity groups, multicultural centers, faculty mentoring, and more—is not sufficient for URM students to feel as though they belong to a larger campus community. Is the campus an environment where students feel affirmed and validated in their cultural heritage, or is it a space where they have to 'annihilate' their cultural strengths in order to assimilate and integrate into Whiteness?

Cooper (2009) notes that nurturing an inclusive campus environment requires a recognition of the multiplicity of cultures and unique cultural values; it is "…not 'fixed' and should not be reified as a unified historically continuous set of practices or norms" (p. 3) but should instead incorporate a social constructionist perspective that highlights a set of shared common values that support an affirming environment. Cooper writes that "a community of learning [is] purposeful, open, just, disciplined, caring, and celebrative… Student affairs professionals, faculty members and university administrators could collaborate in consciously creating campus "traditions" that foster these aspects of a supportive learning community" (p. 4). This means that URM students should feel recognized, seen, and valued in the academic and extracurricular spaces on campus. When URM students are supported in the process of developing both academic self-efficacy and a sense of belonging among a welcoming campus community, they are more likely to persist through the duration of their career in higher education.

In summary, there are myriad factors that influence the likelihood of URM students persisting to graduation in a higher education institution. Recognizing that URM students disproportionately attend under resourced K-12 schools and therefore might lack particular markers of "academic readiness" in contrast to their White counterparts (such as standardized

testing scores), the development and scaffolding of academic self-efficacy as well as practical academic skills can positively impact the likelihood of URM students persisting. It is critically important that not only do URM students build out their practical academic skills, but that they also develop and hone the belief in their own self-authorship to succeed academically – this is especially salient as many structures at PWIs underscore a deficit framework of URM students' academic preparation (the notion that they are "coming from behind"). Additionally, URM students must develop a sense of belonging on campus, or a connection to the community and the belief that they truly fit at this PWI (despite narratives that might suggest otherwise).

In the following section, I analyze the literature on bridge programs, and in particular, on how they build academic self-efficacy and skillsets as well as a sense of belonging for many URM students.

Bridge programs to support persistence of URM students

A body of research has explored the ways in which bridge programs can facilitate academic self-efficacy, academic skills, a sense of belonging, and/or a more positive campus racial climate. A number of these studies have focused specifically on academic disciplines where URM students are particularly underrepresented, such as the STEM (Science Technology Engineering Math) fields. A 2016 study by Tomasko et al. described how a bridge program that targeted underrepresented students focused on the cultivation of academic preparedness and sense of belonging. The results suggested that the development of these two skills in a bridge program can support students' persistence, not only in college, but in STEM fields in particular. A 2017 study by Cooper et al. that explored a bridge program that was designed to support academically "underprepared" students in the sciences described strategies to facilitate "active learning" among program participants. A study by Russomanno et al.(2010) focused on the

increased development of students' sense of preparedness after their participation in a STEM bridge program. However, none of these studies specifically focus on URM students; they instead focus on the aggregate term "underrepresented students" which can include students of any racial identity that are first generation and/or low-SES status.

Several studies on bridge programs focused in particular on the development of academic self-efficacy among URM participants (Bruno et al., 2016; Maton et al., 2016; Russomanno et al., 2010; Raines, 2012). Another group of studies assessed STEM bridge programs that emphasized sense of belonging (Maton et al., 2016; Pritchard et al., 2016; Stolle-McAllister et al., 2011; Tomasko et al., 2016). Of those studies, only two of them studied STEM bridge programs that were specifically designed for URM populations (Maton et al., 2016; Stolle-McAllister et al., 2011).

It is notable that there were only a few studies that focused on how pre-college bridge programs can facilitate academic and socio-emotional skill-building in tandem, and these studies are rarely situated in the critical paradigm. For example, Maton et al.'s study in particular examined an array of academic and socio-emotional programming facilitated through the Meyeroff Scholars program and found that introduction to resources, academic advising, mentorship, tutoring, faculty involvement, and introduction to on-campus administrators and found this programming positively influenced the students' sense of belonging, research identity, and science identity. Additionally, Strayhorn's (2010) study described how an academic bridge program supported the development of academic self-efficacy, academic skills, and a sense of belonging among URM students. The findings of Strayhorn's study suggest that the development of these academic and social skills in tandem is a key predictor of success during the first semester of college. Similarly, Johnson's (2016) study on the impact of a STEM pre-college

bridge program for URM students found that students developed an academic sense of identity through ample nurturing and academic rigor associated with the program. Johnson's study specifically recommends that the program draw explicit connections between programmatic elements and the students' racial identities, as she found this to be a limitation of the bridge program.

Many of these studies are important analyses of the ways in which bridge programs can provide academic supports and community connections for underrepresented students, and in particular, URM students. However, they do not address the larger racialized campus climate at PWIs, nor do they use CRT as an analytical lens to understand the dynamic interplay between the programmatic supports and the broader campus culture. Moreover, many of these studies use a deficit framework to analyze the experiences of the URM students who participate in the bridge programs (i.e. the language of "remediation" "underpreparedness" or even "at-risk"). Finally, many of these studies focus on the "impact" of the bridge program, using metrics such as college completion rates or gains in GPA. These studies can provide a greater understanding of successful programmatic design, but without a CRT lens, they fail to situate the experiences of the URM participants within a broader context of institutional racism at PWIs. For example, a bridge program in these studies could be deemed "successful" if the URM student participants persist to graduation, but those students might feel isolated, lonely, and depressed upon their graduation because they were not able to formulate a sense of belonging at a racially hostile PWI. [A sentence here that connects and transitions from bridge programs drawing on cultural wealth.]

Community cultural wealth

Much of the research on how URM students develop academic self-efficacy and skills, as well as a sense of belonging in a challenging racial campus climate (and in particular, through bridge programs) focuses on the "deprivation in Communities of Color". Many bridge programs aim to help URM students bolster their skills, knowledge, and belonging at PWIs, but overly rely on the "banking concept" of education, the notion that students do not possess the cultural capital to know how to navigate higher education institutions. In other words, "schooling efforts usually aim to fill up supposedly passive students with forms of cultural knowledge deemed valuable by dominant society" (Yosso, 2005, p. 75). Instead, Yosso (2005) and Solórzano and Villalpando (1998) propose the concept of *community cultural wealth*, which offers an asset-based framework to describe the dynamic intersection of traditional cultural capital and CRT. Community cultural wealth stands in opposition to the Bordieuan concept of *capital,* or the "knowledges of the upper and middle classes [that] are… valuable to a hierarchical society" and provide "the potential for social mobility through formal schooling" (Yosso, 2005, p. 70). Yosso (2005) also critiques Bourdieu's work by pointing out the hierarchical, assimilationist language:

> Bourdieu's work has often been called upon to explain why Students of Color do not succeed at the same rate as Whites. The dominant groups within society are able to maintain power because access is limited to acquiring and learning strategies to use these forms of capital for social mobility (p. 76)

In contrast, community cultural wealth describes ways in which historically marginalized students develop forms of capital to resist individualistic White-dominant forces that could potentially undermine their success in higher education. Community cultural wealth also pushes back on the prevalent deficit-oriented narrative that URM students need a "leg up" or that they need to assimilate into predominantly White spaces in order to gain upward mobility. This assimilation could mean an abandonment of URM community-oriented tendencies in favor of a

more competitive and individualistic approach to formal schooling, or what Okun (2010) describes as facets of "White supremacy culture". Gloria and Robinson-Kurpius (1996) refer to this phenomenon as *cultural incongruence,* or the ways in which higher education fails to either recognize or value the community-based knowledge that many students of color bring. Instead, community-oriented capital flouts these individualistic, competitive, and often- static traditional forms of capital. Yosso (2005) describes multiple forms of cultural capital that students of color develop by intentionally drawing upon their communities of support, which includes categories such as *aspirational capital*, or future hopes and career-related dreams, or *navigational capital*, which refers to networking and/ or learning to how to maintain high levels of success despite constant stressful conditions. Fundamentally, these forms of capital utilize community to help URM students develop strategies of resistance in order to persist at PWIs.

In the next chapter, I outline the perspectives, frameworks, and methodologies that guided this dissertation. I sought to address a gap in the literature by synthesizing the ways in which 10 URM students understand the relevance of a pre-college summer bridge program over their college career, and I contextualized those stories of relevance within the racialized environment of a PWI. As such, I used research methodologies that allowed the students to narrate their own lived experiences, and I used analytical and theoretical frameworks that dissect the racialized institutional cultures and systems at PWIs.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE

Qualitative Inquiry

This study explored the ways in which undergraduate students understand one particular shared educational experience- their participation in a pre-college summer bridge program- over the course of their undergraduate career. The research questions that guided this study were:

1) What is the enduring relevance of the summer bridge program for URM students as they transition into and through a PWI?
2) In what ways did the summer bridge program support these URM students in developing strategies of *resistance* to address the challenges and contradictions of their experiences at one PWI?

As stated earlier in the dissertation, this study did not aim to explore the success and outcomes of a summer bridge program through metrics such as GPA and test scores, as many other previous studies have (e.g., Barnett et al., 2012; Douglas & Attewell, 2014). I relied on qualitative methods that "emphasize inductive, interpretive methods applied to the everyday world which is seen as subjective and socially constructed" (Anderson, 1987, p. 384) which was best suited to investigate the in-depth experiences of URM students.

Qualitative inquiry draws on sociologist Max Weber's emphasis on *verstehen* (understanding) and describes "the meanings individuals use to understand social circumstances rather than try to identify the "social facts" that comprise a positivist social theory" (Hatch, 1985, p. 143). Hatch (2002) also argues that "when research settings are controlled or contrived or manipulated… the outcomes are studies that tell us little more than how individuals act in narrowly defined and inherently artificial contexts" (p. 7). By contrast, this study sought deep,

rich data on URM students' lives in a naturalistic setting; that is, understanding the enduring relevance of a summer bridge program and how themes of persistence and contradiction were part of their narratives at their university. The interpretation of students' narratives allows for an iterative unfolding of reflection, or as Bogdan & Biklen (1992) state, a "[construction of] a picture that takes shape as you collect and examine the parts" (p. 29). The URM students' participation in a summer bridge program and its relevance to their higher education experience did not exist in a vacuum outside of their racial identity. Therefore, it is not a characteristic that can be isolated for study. It is important to note that the URM students were, in large part, recruited into the summer bridge program because of their racial background, which is inextricably linked to their experiences prior to college, which is connected to their experiences as undergraduates at Elmhill College. Given that the summer bridge program participants were selected in part because of their race, I situated this study within a critical research paradigm.

Critical paradigm

Research drawing from a critical stance acknowledges that "the material world is made up of historically situated structures that have a real impact on the life chances of individuals" (Hatch, 2002, p. 16). Research studies grounded in critical theory center those structures, such as race, and recognizes their influence on participants throughout the research process. Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995) specify that "thinking of race strictly as an ideological construct denies the reality of a racialized society and its impact on "raced" people in their everyday lives" (p. 48). Critical theorists therefore not only acknowledge this precept, but it is foregrounded in their research. Research situated in the critical paradigm attempts to "raise the consciousness of those being oppressed because of historically situated structures… providing understandings that lead to social change" (Hatch, 2002, p. 17).

Epistemologically, critical theory is similar to social constructionism in that both operate from the assumption that we exist in a world where meaning is co-created and there is shared understanding about the nature of reality. However, as Scotland (2012) notes, critical epistemology goes further to link constructionism with "societal ideology… knowledge is both socially constructed and influenced by power relations from within society" (p. 13). Research operating within the critical paradigm addresses these power relations by interrogating values and assumptions, exposing hegemony and inequity, and challenging the status quo by engaging in social action (Crotty, 1998; Duncan, 2002; Parker, 2015). Further, the use of CRT is appropriate as a guiding frame in the critical paradigm for disrupting the deficit-based 'master narrative' found throughout educational research related to URM students.

The critical paradigm acknowledges that assumptions about the world are subjective, deeply political, and negotiated through the lens of the researcher (Hatch, 2002). By acknowledging the central role that race plays in all aspects of the students' lives, my research aims were political and value-driven. This research did not merely describe the particular experiences of URM students who participated in a Bridge program at a PWI, but it also is in conversation with other research that critiques the historical systems of power and privilege that are preserved within higher education institutions, both in the present day and in the future.

I centered my belief that the racism that many racial minorities experience in higher education is a societal ill that must be remedied through equity and action. Therefore, I used the critical paradigm to center the *counterstories* of these particular URM students within the contexts of the summer bridge program as well as the larger bounds of a PWI.

Narrative inquiry

The research study drew on narrative inquiry to tell the stories of URM students' experiences in one pre-college summer bridge program and the subsequent meaning-making that unfolded as a result of that experience. In *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) discuss the foundations of narrative inquiry in the Deweyan tradition, or the understanding that educational research is a study of *experience*. Two key Deweyan principles that narrative inquiry is built upon include the concepts of *continuity*, or the notion that "experiences grow out of other experiences, and experiences lead to further experiences" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 2) and *interaction*, or the conditions of a particular experience. Therefore, narrative inquiry is the study of experience built on the stories of people's past lives that recognizes the interaction between these past lives and their current situation. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) remind us, "there is always a history, it is always changing, and it is always going somewhere" (p. 2). In this way, narrative inquiry was particularly well-suited for a study that examined the *enduring* (which in particular, signals continuity) relevance of the summer bridge program experience for URM students.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) also explain that narrative inquiry is both "a phenomena under study *and* a method of study" (p. 4). This is related to the idea of CRT *counterstories* as both a framework and a methodology. A researcher thinks 'narratively' about the research they conduct in the ways that they seek stories of experience and give shape and depth to those stories. But narrative inquiry is also a method in the use of interviews, field notes, group discussions, and observations to elicit these stories of experience. In this dissertation study, I used narrative inquiry as a frame for centering the experiential knowledge and storytelling of URM students as valid and worthy of exploration. Inherent in these stories was the students'

past, or their life histories up until the point of their participation in the summer bridge program, as well as their stories of their college experiences following the bridge program. We can learn about the relevance of the summer bridge program in the undergraduate experiences of URM students by understanding the larger history of their experiences in racialized locales of higher education, as well as their encounters with other systems and structures in society.

I also used narrative inquiry as a method of study, or the central ways of gathering information for my research. Polkinghorne (1988) stresses "the importance of having research strategies that can work with the narratives people use to understand the human world" (p. xi). Through the use of semi-structured interviewing with individual students and focus group interviews, which I describe in further detail below, I asked iterative questions that allowed URM students to reflect on the enduring relevance of their experience in a summer bridge program within the larger frame of their experience at PWIs.

Narrative inquiry as a methodology recognizes that knowledge is co-created during the process of storytelling. In my research, the stories that the URM students shared were then recreated in my rendering of them, as is consistent with the theoretical structures of an individual CRT counterstory. An additional set of knowledge was co-created in the focus groups as URM students came together to reflect on and build off of each other's stories. To conduct research that is emancipatory, my goal was to create "research in an image of equitable power, jointly constructed knowledge, and respectful participation" (Broido & Manning, 2002, p. 437). This connects with the criticality of narrative inquiry in that it centers the voices and stories of historically minoritized students. By asking participants to reflect on the enduring relevance of their summer bridge program experience and then to place that experience within a larger context

of their life at a PWI, my aim was to engage in conscious raising and a dissertation that can lead to implications for social and policy changes.

Composite counterstorytelling

To address my second research question, I utilized narrative analysis and created a composite counterstory (CCS). In this process, I wanted to write a collective representation of individual racialized experiences of contradiction, and resistance at the Elmhill College. While narrative inquiry attempts to capture the individualized experiences of the students, composite counterstorytelling then amalgamates the commonalities and threads of connection into one shared collective story. In particular, Hubain et al. (2016) discuss how composite counterstorytelling, "... allows for thematic grouping of participants' experiences that emerged from the analysis of the data [and] for a creative and in-depth approach to presenting data, potentially reaching readers in a way that they would not have otherwise been reached" (p. 951). A CCS could appear problematic as a method in that one might posit that it treats the lived experiences of minoritized populations as monolithic by "flattening" their individual stories into one narrative. Conversely, the purposes of the composite story are to give a deeper and richer understanding of the shared experiences of people of color in this country. As Cook and Dixson (2013) state of CRT, counterstories go against "the notion that the individual experiences that people have with racism and discrimination cannot represent the collective experiences that people of color have with racism and discrimination" (p. 1243). In this vein, a CCS uses the individual stories to create a narrative of similarities, illustrating the endemic and ubiquitous nature of racism, prejudice, and White supremacy in the United States.

Cook and Dixson (2013) also make the point that composite counterstorytelling serves a valuable role in exposing the harsh realities that minoritized populations endure, but as a

methodology, it also serves to protect their anonymity in situations where pseudonyms might not be enough to obscure the identity of the individual. In this dissertation, the CCS includes the voices of the 10 students, but it also incorporates information provided by other key stakeholders in the bridge program such as the Director. The fusion of individual narratives into a shared collective makes space for the interviewees' critiques in their fullest form while still protecting vulnerable individuals from potential recourse. Lopez et al. (2019) conducted a CCS of Philippine teachers and wrote that the role of the CCS is to show the dimensions of both the context and the situation so that the reader can get as close as possible to that experience. Lopez et al. write that the goal of a CCS is to "allow the reader to have an increased sense of contact with the phenomenon without fully possessing it. The composite first person narrative is a reflective story that is more than a definition or series of statements about a phenomenon" (p. 147).

Cook and Dixson (2013) call CCS "a literary approach to writing data" and underscore that it is a particular research methodology that allows the research participants to embody characters that are rich, complex, fully-formed, and even contradictory at times. They acknowledge that one critique of composite counterstories is that they are overly "romantic". By 'romantic', the authors mean that the melding of qualitative data with literary style in the narrative form might be viewed by some academic research communities as unnecessarily detailed (even indulgent) when the weight of the experience should stand alone. These critics might see the formation of a CCS as embellishment. But as the authors share their own CCS, framing the storying of an experience that often reflects racialized pain or trauma as "indulgent" is deeply problematic. As the authors point out, "few African-Americans are nostalgic about racism and injustice" (p. 1253). Moreover, as Cook and Dixson summarize:

> A literary approach used within the composite counterstory forces us to listen and hopefully empathize with the depth of emotion within the narratives of the educators who participated in this study – to reorient the reader to the experiences of people who are often invisible... (p. 1253)

In the actual process of writing a composite counterstory, both Lopez et al. (2019) and Cook and Dixson (2013) provide specific, and at times step-by-step, guidance. For example, Lopez et al. first identified commonalities across narratives (an approach similar to coding) and used those commonalities as the foundation for their composite characters. They emphasize the importance of re-reading interview transcripts with the broader themes as the focus in order to create the characters. This aligned with my use of narrative analysis to find instances that reflect the strategies of resistance within the students' storying of their experiences at the Elmhill College. Following their reading and creation of composite characters. Lopez et al. "placed them in larger social, educational situations to discuss the emergent themes that emerged across the teachers' stories" (p. 155). I followed suit in my CCS; though my composite characters were physically located in the Bridge Program office for the duration of the CCS, they were remembering and reflecting on various experiences that they had during their undergraduate career. This free-flowing conversation between the composite characters and the Director of the bridge program gave the reader insight into other situations that the characters had experienced in which they wove their reflections on resistance and contradiction. By situating these composite characters in a narrative inquiry space that underscores the Deweyan concepts of *continuity* and *interaction*, the students simultaneously reflected on past experiences, weaving those experiences into the present moment, and then connected this to their visions of the future.

Fundamentally, the CCS gave shape and dimension to the students' experiences in ways that went beyond narrative inquiry. In my CCS, I almost exclusively used the voices of the URM students to create both monologue and lines of dialogue. As stated earlier, narrative inquiry is a

process of co-creating a reality between the researcher and the interviewee. By using the students' words verbatim in the CCS, I minimized my own authorial voice in the co-creation of the story. This aligns with the fundamental goals of CRT by centering the lived expertise and experiences of URM students.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Site selection and background

The site selected for this dissertation study is a pre-college summer bridge program (referred to hereafter as "Bridge Program") run through the Bridge Program Office at Elmhill College, a small suburban PWI in New England. I purposely selected this institution for several reasons. First, photos from the Bridge Program website showed that the large majority of the students that participated were URM students; further conversations with the Director confirmed that the vast majority of participants (although not all) are URM students. Additionally, the Bridge Program is part of a larger Bridge Program Office, where the student participants have access to mentorship, resources, and academic and social support for the duration of their educational career at the Elmhill College. Finally, the site was selected for logistical purposes: it was a manageable distance to drive to in order to conduct the interviews and focus groups, and both the Director and the Associate Director of the Bridge Program Office was accommodating and responsive to my inquiries.

My interest in studying the experiences of students in the Bridge Program stemmed from the history of Elmhill College. The college was founded in 1839 by a pioneering social justice educator and was the first co-ed college in the country to provide a higher education regardless

of race or socioeconomic status. I was intrigued by how that history might manifest in the microcosm of a small suburban college that is in a predominantly White part of the state yet is directly next to an urban city with diverse racial demographics.

Despite its history, currently Elmhill College is underrepresented by particular racial and ethnic populations, not only in the student body, but also as represented in the faculty and administration. For example, according to the Common Data set available for 2019 on Elmhill College's website, Latinx students comprise 10.1% of the student enrollment, Black students comprise 4.8% of total student enrollment, and Native American students comprise less than 1% of the total student enrollment (School Website). When compared with racial demographic data for secondary school children in the state, there are clear discrepancies. In 2020, the state Department of Education reported that Black students comprised 9.2%, Latinx students comprised 22.3%, and Native American student comprised less than 1% of the total secondary student population.

Bridge program background

The Bridge Program at Elmhill College incorporates many of the important programmatic elements that multiple studies have identified as contributing to success and persistence for URM students. These elements include academic support and resource-building, leadership development, mentorship, planned social activities, and sustained engagement with the Bridge Program advisors over the school year. The Bridge Program and the Bridge Program Office are not affiliated with either the Office of Diversity and Equity at Elmhill College, nor do they align themselves with the multicultural affinity groups on campus. Additionally, they accept students each year to the program who are White. The Bridge Program website specifies that the program:

> ...focuses on fostering academic excellence, leadership, meaningful academic and social connections, and personal development to create a foundation for persistence towards a timely graduation. Through participation in [the Bridge Program], students utilize campus resources and develop skills necessary to thrive academically in order to reach their personal goals of graduation. (School website)

The Bridge Program has been in existence since 1968 and is committed to fostering the academic and professional success of their graduates through sustained support.

The Bridge Program Office works with Admissions Office and also recruits independently in order to attract student participants each year. When Elmhill College applicants complete the Common App—an undergraduate admissions application that is affiliated with 800 colleges and universities, they must select if they want to be considered for "Special Admissions Opportunities." When students select this option, they are informed that "the [Bridge Program] provides first generation students from diverse educational, economic, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds a unique admission opportunity based on their potential to succeed at the university level" (School Website). However, the Bridge Program also participates in forms of 'grassroots' recruiting, including hosting info sessions at local high schools and relying on word of mouth from high school administrators and local academic nonprofits (such as the Posse Scholars program). When students select this option, they participate in an interview with one of the Bridge Program advisors before being formally selected.

Some students who did not specifically select that they wanted to be considered for the Bridge Program on the Common App are still recruited into the program through outreach from the program directors. Despite the fact that the Bridge Program website description does not (and legally cannot) specify that they only accept URM students, the Director reported that most of the students come from URM backgrounds. Of significance is that students who do enroll in the Bridge Program are only *conditionally accepted* to Elmhill College. In other words, they *must*

participate in and successfully complete the program during the summer in order to enroll in Elmhill College in the fall. Anecdotally, the Director and Associate Director have shared that there have been students each year who do not complete the program and forego their enrollment to Elmhill College. Given that the majority of participants in the summer bridge program are URM students, their race is inextricably linked to their educational experiences and opportunities in college. Paradoxically, these URM students are given the 'chance' to enroll at a PWI, but they must participate in a program that singles them out in part because of their racial identity. The Bridge Program is free for all students who participate. Additionally, the students have the opportunity to earn up to six undergraduate credit hours for free. When students successfully complete the Bridge Program and matriculate into Elmhill College in the fall, they are given a one-time $1,000 scholarship.

The Bridge Program is a six-week residential program that takes place during the summer leading up to freshman year. The Bridge Program participants are in residence in the campus dorms Sunday – Thursday every single week, and they are given the weekends off. During the week, the students attend classes, participate in study breaks and academic activities, attend presentations by various on-campus offices and resource spaces, engage in team-building, and complete their homework for each of the courses.

During the summer, the students have access to two forms of mentorship. First, they have Bridge Program advisors, who are paid staff members and employees of the college that continue to work with the students during the academic year. Second, there are Peer Counselors (PCs) who are previous Bridge Program participants who live in residence with the new cohort and provide academic and socio-emotional support, as well as facilitate a sense of community. The PCs are recruited by the Bridge Program staff and interviewed during the spring semester. The

PCs' responsibilities during the summer are multi-faceted. They counsel and advise participants, facilitate team-building activities, offer advice to current students about which courses to enroll in and which professors they should take, provide advice on how to manage the dynamics of a PWI, and act as liaisons for the students and the Bridge Program staff. The PCs have lived through the particular experience of the Bridge Program, and they pass on the knowledge and wisdom they gained from that experience to the next cohort of Bridge Program participants. Though the PCs were only paid for their work during the summer, many of the students reported that their PCs continue to serve as informal mentors to them for the duration of their undergraduate career.

The other mentor group was comprised of the Bridge Program advisors— staff, who are adult professionals who work in the Bridge Program. For example, the Director or Associate Director are such advisors. These individuals are full-time employees of the college, and one of their job requirements is to provide counseling to Bridge Program participants for the duration of their undergraduate career. The Bridge Program staff all have offices within the larger Bridge Program Office, and many of the students treated their Bridge Program advisor as "one stop shopping." In other words, they were a clearinghouse to help the students understand what steps to take when they had a dilemma, whether it was personal, academic, extra-curricular, etc. It should be noted that although the Bridge Program runs during the summer before freshman year, the Bridge Program supports are ongoing for the duration of students' undergraduate experiences at Elmhill College.

Participant selection

I used purposive homogenous sampling to preliminarily select nine URM students who all completed the Bridge Program at Elmhill College in order to explore the variability within

each student's experience. Because of last minute challenges with scheduling interviews and a cancellation, I overcompensated by recruiting and selecting10 participants. By using purposive homogenous sampling to recruit interviewees who have already been pre-selected by the Bridge Program Office for their participation in Bridge Program, the 10 students already represented a range of backgrounds and life histories.

Although being a URM student is not a specific requirement for participation in the Bridge Program, I included a question in the initial recruitment questionnaire (see Appendix) that asked the prospective participants to select their racial identity from a list, and I only selected participants from URM backgrounds. I refined the definition of "minority students" to focus specifically on underrepresented minoritized (URM) students (see Definitions of Terms). My sampling rationale for understanding the experiences of these students in particular is because they historically have lower rates of persistence and graduation, lower testing scores and GPA. It is in light of this historic underrepresentation and enduring oppression that I wanted to explore how summer bridge programs can nurture skillsets and capital that support URM students in developing strategies of resistance.

In selecting participants, I was also interested in variability of the students' ages. I chose three sophomore students because they are almost halfway through their academic career and completed the Bridge Program one year earlier. Three participants were juniors, and four participants were seniors, entering into their final semesters of their undergraduate experience. My rationale for choosing participants at different stages was so that I could explore the *enduring relevance* of their experience as participants of the Bridge Program while still in the process of negotiating their identities as undergraduate URM students. Selecting students at different points in their academic trajectory helped me to understand how they, as *current*

scholars and community members at Elmhill College, made sense of this experience as it continued to unfold and develop, and how that relevance evolved over time.

In order to select my participants, I relied on my personal connections with the Director and the Associate Director of Bridge Program, to email all eligible former Bridge Program participants who were current undergraduate sophomores, juniors, and seniors during the Fall of 2019 (see Appendix). The email included a short summary of the study and information about compensation. Each student received a $50 Amazon gift certificate upon the completion of the study. Interested participants were invited to take a brief survey indicating their name, age, racial identity, contact information, and general availability. I received more responses than I had slots for interviews, so I selected the students at random after making sure that they fit the age and the racial demographic requirements. By keeping my participant criteria broad and by having the Director contact all potential interviewees within the particular age range, I avoided relying on personal recommendations for participants from both the Director and the Associate Director. Therefore, I solicited a range of potential perspectives on the enduring relevance of the Bridge Program.

Challenges in the research process

As I relied on my institutional contacts (e.g., various administrators) to recruit study participants, I was cognizant that if I were to ask for their personal recommendations, they might select students who were model participants, or students who stood out as Bridge Program 'superstars' to represent the program well. To mitigate this, I asked the Director of Bridge Program to send a generic email that briefly described the study to *all* eligible student participants instead of asking her for personal recommendations for interviewees. In this way, I relied on sampling that used basic demographic information to avoid personal recommendations.

During interviews, I did have one last minute cancellation from a student that had originally agreed to participate in the interviews and focus groups. Because I only had a limited amount of time where I could be on the Elmhill College campus due to geographic distance, I first solicited the other interested students that had completed the survey to see if any were available. When none of them were able to step in, I recruited eligible students by word of mouth in the Bridge Program Office. I briefly asked two students their class year and if they had participated in the Bridge Program, and when they responded in the affirmative (and were of the same class year as the student that dropped out), I asked if they would be interested in participating in the interviews and the focus groups. Because I spoke to two separate students to solicit their participation, I ended up with 10 participants in total as opposed to the nine that I originally intended.

My final concern was in my interviewing and focus group facilitation skills. My pilot practice with interviewing has made me realize that I am an "engaged" interviewer, and my tendency is to conduct interviews in a way that I interpret as "encouraging." For example, I have uttered verbal words of assent during a practice interview. While in the past, I have seen this as an interviewing asset in terms of establishing rapport with the interviewees, I also understand that as an engaged interviewer, I can actually "skew the data", or encourage the participant to respond in a way that perhaps they may not have. To address this concern, I conducted several practice interviews during the Fall of 2017 with current undergraduate students who participated in another bridge program at a large public land grant institution in New England. With the students' permission, I recorded the interviews as well as transcribed them, and these helped me to practice my interview skills.

DATA COLLECTION

I conducted both semi-structured interviews with 10 URM students who had participated in the Bridge Program at Elmhill College and I collected audio recordings of the interviews, which I then transcribed. Following the individual interviews, I conducted two focus groups with five participants in each group, which I both audio and video recorded and then audio transcribed.

Semi-structured interviews

Guest et al. (2006) note that the actual numbers of interviews required for achieving data saturation vary widely. For example, Kuzel (1992) recommends six to eight interviews to achieve variation. Research conducted in the critical paradigm is not overly concerned with achieving maximum variation or seeking disconfirming evidence because its commitments lie in foregrounding the experiential knowledge of each individual as valid. I conducted a total of 10 individual interviews and two focus group interviews with 10 URM students. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes in length. The interviews took place in an empty classroom space on the Elmhill College campus during Fall 2019.

I place the meaning making from these interviews within a broader socio-historical framework (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) by understanding how the people, schools, and day-to-day educational experiences are part of a larger historical narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In recreating the narratives of URM students who have participated in a pre-college summer bridge program through interviews, I examined summer bridge programs as possible sites of resistance, support, community building, and academic self-efficacy. By recreating the experiences of these students, or as Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state, “to narrate the person in terms of the process” (p. 30), I sought to understand the relevance of a program that is

designed to facilitate a transition for students widely considered "at risk" of attrition. In the interviews, I wanted to learn from these students' stories.

Prior to the interviews, I conducted several informal conversations with the Director and Associate Director of the Bridge Program, in order to gather pertinent background information about the purpose, aims, and structure of the Bridge Program. I inquired about the admissions process, day-to-day schedule, programming, and the staffing. With this information for context at the start of the interviews, I then asked each participant to reconstruct the details of their experience within the Bridge Program and reflect on its relevance in their holistic undergraduate experiences at Elmhill College. I then asked questions that addressed their racialized experiences as URM students at Elmhill College more broadly. I encouraged participants to share their experiences in semi-structured individual interviews and subsequently asked them to reflect on themes that arose across individual narratives in the focus groups, which I will describe in greater detail in the following section. I used strategies that underscore Deweyan notions of *continuity* and *interaction* within a particular experience.

This interview protocol also gave shape to what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) refer to as the four directions of inquiry (following Dewey), or *inward, outward, backward, forward*:

> By inward, we mean toward the internal conditions, such as feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions. By outward, we mean toward the existential conditions, that is, the environment. By backward and forward, we refer to temporality- past, present, and future. We wrote that *to experience an experience* … is to experience it simultaneously in these four ways and to ask questions pointing each way (p. 50).

An example of how I attempted to embody the four directions of inquiry was in asking follow-up questions during the interview that asked students to both reflect on their actions (outward) in addition to what they were feeling at the time of the action (inward). I asked follow-up questions about the visions that some students had for their futures (forward) and asked for more context

on how their life histories influenced those future aspirations (backward). I used what Hatch (2002) refers to as "guiding questions" (See Appendix A). Seidman (2013) asserts that:

> although the interviewer comes to each interview with a basic question that establishes the purpose and focus of the interview, it is in response to what the participant says that the interviewer follows up, asks for clarification, seeks concrete details, and requests stories (p. 84).

Following Hatch and Seidman, my interview questions were intentionally open-ended to allow for unconstrained reflection. I also followed up with the participants' responses and asked them to elaborate on stories that they told. For example, when a participant shared about a time they experienced stereotype threat on campus, I followed-up with the question, "Can you tell me more about that?" in order to understand the full extent of their story. Additionally, I often asked for clarification and elaboration on various experiences that the participant related as they unfolded. Many of the participants assumed during our conversations that I was much more informed about racialized events that had occurred on campus in the previous few years, so I often had to ask for them to explain the events they were referring to.

Focus groups

Immediately following individual interviews with all 10 participants, I conducted two focus groups with five students in each group, randomly assigned based on their availability. The focus groups were approximately 90 minutes each. The focus groups were both audio- and video-recorded so that I could cross-reference which individual was speaking when the audio recording alone made a student's identity unclear. I used semi-structured questions in the focus groups that were designed to both elicit new information about the enduring relevance of the Bridge Program, but also to allow participants to interact and build off of themes that the students brought up in their individual interviews (Hatch, 2002; Wilson, 1997). Allowing all of

the students in the focus group to reflect on themes that emerged in individual interviews together provided additional context to particular experiences within the Bridge Program and racialized experiences at a PWI in general. I was interested in how the students might engage in shared meaning making with one another, and further, how this created a shared sense of relevance of the summer bridge program overall, as well as a counterstory of stigma and resistance in the racialized spaces of a PWI.

Using focus groups in conjunction with individual interviews was critical to my positionality as a White researcher. As stated earlier, one of the aims of research conducted in a CRT framework is to uplift and amplify the voices of the minoritized. There are racialized power dynamics at play that are inherent in the use of individual interviews as a research method, especially when the interviewer is a White person and the interviewee is from a minoritized background (as all of my student participants were). A focus group, with its emphasis on shared meaning making with other participants, minimizes some of that power differential, allowing for more open discussion and shared reflection. Therefore, this method decentered me as the researcher in the data gathering process and foregrounded the collective voices of URM students.

DATA ANALYSIS

The taped interviews and focus group conversations were transcribed using Otter.Ai, a free transcription service. Then, I reviewed every transcription and edited errors that had occurred in the transcribing process (such as the transcription service misspelling a word or misidentifying a new person speaking). I recorded notes following each individual interview to capture body language, nonverbal cues, and overall impressions of the interviews. I also used analytic memos, which are short reflections on my learning during data analysis, in order to

record my own responses and reactions to the participants' transcriptions. As Saldaña states, memo writing serves as an "internal reality check of your thinking processes" (2013, p. 44), as well as personal biases which may arise during the data analysis process. Analytic memo writing allowed me to reflexive about the content of the interviews and about how my own positionality shaped the analysis.

In both the Findings and Discussion chapters of this dissertation, I annotate where the student quotes were heard (either in a focus group- FG- or an individual interview- II). I also included a page number that references the particular page of the interview transcript. Therefore, as an example, "FG I, p. 9" denotes a quotation from Focus Group 1 on page 9 of the transcription.

Narrative analysis

In the spirit of defining narrative inquiry as both a phenomenon and a methodology, I used narrative analysis to review the data generated during the interviews and focus groups. Interpretations of what constitutes "narrative analysis" vary widely from different qualitative researchers. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) in particular discuss the challenges of moving from 'field texts' (i.e., interview transcripts in the case of this study) to 'research texts', or the completed narratives that are created within the multi-dimensional inquiry space. They explain that the challenges lie in the "responses to the questions of meaning and social significance" (p. 131) which are what differentiate narrative analysis from other forms of analysis.

In my analysis, I relied specifically on Chase's interpretation (2005) of narrative analysis in interview-based studies. I borrowed from Chase's description (2005) of her own *narrative strategy*, which "draws attention to the complexity within each [student's] voice – to the various subject positions each [student] takes up- as well as to diversity among [student] voices because

each narrative strategy is particular" (p. 663). Chase describes a research study that uses four distinct readings of interview transcripts with a focus on particular themes and positions in each reading. She then outlines three different ways in which the researcher can use their voice to create a narrative interpretation based on those readings. Of the three different voices that Chase describes, I used what she refers to as the researcher's "supportive voice", where the focus of the narrative analysis is on faithfully reconstructing the narrator's experience while moderating the researcher's own decision-making process in the translation and transcription of that experience. As Chase (2005) states, the strategy of "supportive voice" aims to create "a self-reflective and respectful distance between researchers' and narrators' voices" (p. 665).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state that the researcher must engage in multiple close readings of field texts in order to construct an accurate chronicle of the experience being described by participants. They recommend using narrative coding in the multiple readings focusing on "the patterns, narrative threads, tensions, and themes either within or across an individual's experience and in the social sitting" (p. 132). Using a combination of Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and Chase's (2005) approaches to narrative analysis, I completed multiple close readings of the interview transcriptions with different foci for each reading in order to address my research questions. During the first reading of each individual interview, I focused specifically on identifying words, phrases, or themes that speak to *enduring relevance* of the Bridge Program (research question 1). During the second reading, I focused closely on phrases or words that speak to ideas of CRT *resistance* as it relates to the students' racialized experiences at Elmhill College. During the third reading, I concentrated on phrases or words that speak to ideas of *contradiction* as it relates to CRT and the students' racialized experiences at Elmhill College. I also recorded overall impressions of the participant interviews (as well as the focus group

interviews) in order to give additional shape and context to their stories. By doing so, I engaged in the kind of narrative analysis that Polkinghorne (1995) refers to, one that does not look to a collective understanding of a knowable reality through thematic commonalities, but views narrative as socially constructed exercises in meaning-making that is messy, multi-layered, and sometimes contradictory.

In the process of data analysis, I identified similarities between and across individual stories. In this instance, I am referring to them as "common themes", to borrow language from qualitative researcher Jeong Hee Kim (2016). Kim draws on Polkinghorne's (1995) description of the differences between *analysis of narrative* and *narrative analysis* under the larger umbrella of narrative inquiry. In Chapter 5, I relied specifically on *analysis of narrative*, which Polkinghorne (1995) describes as a method to "construct experiences as familiar by emphasizing the common elements that appear over and over" (p. 10).

Kim (2016) also states that in *analysis of narrative* that findings are arranged around particular themes that are frequently identified across the individual narratives. In research that centers the voices of URM students, I am aware of the historical researcher tendencies to "flatten" the URM experiences into one universal experience that reflects all URM individuals. In the cultural lexicon, there is an old adage that, in particular, Black people are often called upon by White individuals to 'represent their people' or speak for the entire Black population when they are questioned about some facet of Black culture. I am cognizant of this historical premise, and I deliberately did not want to collapse the individual narratives of the 10 students, especially students with unique racial identities. By contrast, even in pointing out similarities and themes across stories, I looked at variations *within* stories. Therefore, while I identified five

common themes for Chapter 5, I highlighted each participants' individual voices within these themes, as is consistent with Polkinghorne's *analysis of narrative.*

Creating a composite counterstory

In the creation of a composite counterstory, I sought to expand on the limitations of narrative analysis by using the students' voices directly to shape the vast majority of the story. In this, I was attempting to mute what Chase (2005) refers to as the researcher's "supportive voice" even further by creating a CCS that used the students' words verbatim as the bulk of the "data". However, I used creative decision-making to decide *what* voices to include in the process of writing the CSS, so I was as transparent as possible in describing the process of building the story. My challenge was in striking the balance of still remaining as faithful to the individual narrator's rendering of their own lived experience as possible. For example, I constructed the CCS with direct quotes from the students, but at times, I had to put these quotes in a slightly different situational context than the participant originally described. I did this to enhance the continuity and flow of the CCS. Therefore, the use of Chase's supportive voice (2005) in my narrative analysis also aligns with CRT in that it uplifts the stories of URM students that have historically been at the margins of society. Using supportive voice treats these stories as valid in their own right, as opposed to valid *because* they have been 'brought to the surface' through the research process itself.

Patton and Catching (2009) provide one of the most comprehensive outlines on the process of creating a composite counterstory (CCS) in their study focusing on the narratives of African American student affairs faculty. First, the authors describe the process of analyzing the narratives that they collected, where they focused on particular incidents that impacted the participants' identities as faculty members.. The authors then fused these narratives to create

lines of dialogue from characters in particular settings that either closely resemble or run parallel to the experiences and narratives that their interviewees shared. In this dissertation, I similarly focused on particular incidents that my participants describe as moments when they experienced racialized challenges and contradiction, or moments when they modeled strategies of *resistance*, and then I combined these incidents into a cohesive narrative.

In analyzing examples of CCSs, the setting and background characters are secondary to the central aspect of the story, which is the dialogue itself. In essence, Patton and Catching's (2009) counterstory appears almost as a focus group transcript, with some additional details about context and setting, which provided the framework for my own CCS. However, there are notable additions where the authors provide narration about the inner monologues of the two protagonists. These glimpses into the characters' inner thoughts gives additional context into the sometimes-contradictory nature of what they are thinking and what they state out loud. This is particularly relevant in a CRT framework, where often people of color often have to be hyperconscious of the tone of their speech in addition to the content because of the racist ideas of those that they are interacting with.

Patton and Catching (2009) also describe the deliberation of creating two "protagonists" of the CSS, in addition to an "antagonist". As Patton and Catching state in their research with African American faculty members:

> The symbolism is also prominent in composite character development. The protagonist characters in the counterstory not only represent the stories of 13 African American faculty, but they also have larger social meanings in relation to the operation of race and racism in society and its disproportionate impact on racially oppressed groups. Conversely, the antagonistic character not only reflects individual, localized thinking and behaviors among beneficiaries of systemic racial dominance but also alludes to how such elements typically play out in academic settings and beyond the academy (p. 717).

Patton and Catching created an antagonist character that represents the *master narrative* – the dominant hegemonic story that is told by those who have racial privilege and power. In their CCS, the antagonist pushes back against the lived experiences of racism experienced by the two protagonists. The antagonist is desperate to explain away their experiences, or to point to them as exceptions to the rule, as opposed to evidence of a system. In creating this character, Patton and Catching have captured an amalgam of tropes, microaggressions, colorblind assumptions, and deficit narratives that make up many hegemonic narratives about people of color in educational settings. The antagonist character is not a caricature. By contrast, she uses dialogue and phrases that many people might use themselves. But in contrast to the explanations that the protagonists provide, the problems of this master narrative as the *only* narrative are laid bare; what author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) refers to as "the danger of a single story".

In my own CCS, I composited the voices of the 10 students that I interviewed into three protagonists. To underscore the symbolistic importance of the Bridge Program office as a safe space (see Chapter 5), I used that space as the setting to illustrate how students could go to the Bridge Program office at any time during their undergraduate career and feel that they could be their true selves and not be judged. To use a metaphor, they could shed their armor that they carry around the rest of the predominantly White campus. Many students in their interviews reported that they relied on the Bridge Program office as a space where they could decompress, find community, and check in with someone. By contrast, other spaces on the predominantly White campus feel uncomfortable to many of the student interviewees, or they reported that they felt that they had to behave in a different way in those spaces. I used the campus president as an "antagonist" in this CCS, someone who openly espouses the kind of CRT *master narrative* around institutional diversity and equity that are all-too-common at PWIs. Instead of situating the

'antagonist' in the room with the students, I drew on the character of the Bridge Program Director as a more 'neutral' third party to whom the students were talking following an event with the campus president. The Bridge Program Director as a character served in a particular purpose – the students were able to report back to her what they *said* to the campus president, while also sharing what they *meant*. In this, the Bridge Program Director serves as a trusted confidante for the students, which further underscores the Bridge Program Office as a safe space. However, the Bridge Program Director also serves as the voice of the campus administration in this CCS, providing perspective as someone is caught in bind. While she can voice support for the students and affirm their experience, she also has to adhere to institutional policies as an employee of the university. This provides another dimension to the theme of *contradiction*. Additionally, as *contradiction* was inherent in many students' storying of their experiences at Elmhill College, I used the Bridge Program Director as a character who could serve as an outlet for stories of that contradiction.

In creating the dialogue, I borrowed almost entirely from either slightly adjusted quotes from the interviews, or direct verbatim quotes when they were appropriate. In wanting to minimize my authorial embellishments in this process, and to stay as true to the spirit of the student narratives as I could, I refrained as much as I could from amending the student voices. When necessary, I added some filler phrases to make the CCS flow better (for example, in using greetings between the students and Director, or to situate the story as immediately following the lunch with the President). Even though there are not 10 student characters in the CCS, I incorporated direct quotes from all 10 students that I interviewed, in order to be as representative as possible of the range of stories and experiences.

Finally, though Patton and Catching (2009) occasionally described the protagonists' inner dialogue in their CCS, I refrained from using this in my own CCS. I am conscious of my positionality as a White woman recreating a collective experience. As that collective experience is based on the 10 URM students' retelling of their story to *me*, I felt that it was anathema to the tenets of CRT to creatively interpret the students' thoughts in my own words or to elaborate on what I *thought* they might mean in a particular situation within the CCS.

Role of the researcher

Some qualitative researchers posit that the validity and rigor of the study would have been enhanced if I had engaged in the process of 'bracketing' my biases in order "to mitigate the potential deleterious effects of unacknowledged preconceptions related to the research" (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 81). However, as Hatch (2002) notes, "researchers taking critical… approaches want to be aware of their biases and preconceptions, but they see no need to set them aside" (p. 86). This study is grounded in the critical research paradigm, which allows for the political motives of the researcher to guide the research process. For example, the interview questions that I designed are not neutral. I asked participants about times that they experienced racism at Elmhill College. This study acknowledges that the researcher's interpretation of the interviewee's reconstruction of their experience cannot be divorced from the researcher's preconceptions and beliefs.

Researcher positionality

I came to this dissertation with an outsider's perspective. I am someone who has been privileged to have an abundance of resources and support systems, both fiscal and academic, available to me in my pursuit of higher education. I went to a PWI, where my presence on

campus and my academic capabilities due to my race were never called into question. It has only been in my professional life that I have begun to explore nuances of White supremacy and its relation to White privilege and I have tried to understand the lived experiences of minoritized students in higher education on a deeper level.

As a White woman who previously recruited, interviewed, and advised minoritized students at the Institute for Recruitment of Teachers (IRT), a nonprofit organization that is devoted to breaking racial barriers in the academy, my Whiteness requires that I am constantly reflexive about why I want to conduct research to understand the experiences of minoritized students. I know the importance of standing in solidarity, especially in the current political climate, and of raising the voices of minoritized populations. Because I benefit from White supremacy, it is critical that I use this privilege to center my participant's voices to fight against systems of oppression. As Deyhle wrote in 2000 regarding her outsider positionality as a White woman when interviewing Navajo youth:

> … accepting their lived experiences as valid, I moved "race" from the borders to the center of my analysis… In the process, I replaced a "cultural difference" standpoint- a more neutral position -with the political position of "racial warfare." Within this "war," I observed cultural differences being twisted and used by Whites to maintain racial inequities within educational, political, economic, and social institutions (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000, p. 166)

I approached this research with both a professional and a personal investment in the success of URM students in higher education. Professionally and personally, I see how systemic racism exists in various sectors in this country, including higher education. As a result, I understand why persistence rates for minoritized students in higher education continue to be lower than their White counterparts. On a personal level, I believe in the fundamental equality of opportunity and access for all students. And last, I believe that there are very few higher education institutions where students of color do not experience, at least on some level, feelings of marginalization or

imposter syndrome. This contributes to the urgency of research that aims to improve their circumstances.

As the former Associate Director and Manager of Programs at the IRT, I understood that summer bridge programs are designed with the intention to have a positive impact on a URM student's persistence at a PWI. However, I knew that there was a possibility that the data would uncover negative experiences and outcomes for students who participated in the Bridge Program at Elmhill College. Or perhaps the students thought their experience in the Bridge Program was irrelevant to their overall trajectory in higher education. By conducting research in the critical paradigm, I foregrounded these political and subjective beliefs, underscoring their importance in the way I gathered and analyzed my data. The critical paradigm contends with the normative; that is, the way things *ought* to be. My intention was that, by understanding the *enduring* relevance of the program for these student participants, I would better understand what has worked for these particular students. Additionally, constructing the interview and focus group questions in an open-ended manner, I enabled the sharing of an array of experiences, both positive and negative.

My experience with outsider positionality in my professional work has taught me how to listen, first and foremost, without trying to introduce my own experience into the mix. This has allowed me to be reflexive in my work and to engage in what Blythe Clinchy (1996) refers to as *connected knowing*; the willingness to believe first, doubt later. Merriam (1998) further explains that "qualitative research can reveal how all the parts work together to form a whole… [and] that meaning is mediated through the investigator's own perceptions" (p. 6). When co-constructing reality with the participants I interviewed, I understood that my findings were some kind of a meeting between their experiences and my own.

Additionally, I recognized the implications of doing cross-cultural research that highlights the experiences of URM students and addressed embedded systems of racism within higher education. In particular, I question the methodological implications of a White woman (like me) to conduct research using CRT as a framework. I often referenced the work of Catherine Vanner (2015) on the positionality and reflexivity of White Western female researchers, who writes:

> Am I doing more harm than good? The privilege that accompanies my social location as a White, upper class… academic woman means that, despite good intentions, my efforts to support education in postcolonial contexts risk being patronizing, insulting, threatening, imperialist, and recolonizing (p. 2).

Ultimately, I recognized these contradictions of embodying a White racial identity while attempting to understand, give context to, and uplift the stories of URM students. In my research design, I addressed these challenges of cross-cultural research in several ways. First, I relied on research protocols that would minimize the racial power differential between interviewer and interviewee as much as possible. The initial interview questions were structured to first, establish familiarity and "break the ice". In the subsequent interview questions, the interviewee did almost all of the talking and reflection. Additionally, the interviews with the Director and the Associate Director of the Bridge Program were designed to provide background information that might give more context to the stories of the students. Third, as previously stated, the focus groups were meant to provide a space where the students could freely reflect with each other and my role as a White researcher (and interloper) that guided the conversation was minimized. Finally, the use of narrative inquiry that guided this dissertation was paramount to addressing the moral quandary of conducting cross-cultural research as a White woman. The stories did not give shape to the research; the stories *were* the research. As Johnson-Bailey (2004) states:

> … feminist scholars have turned to a more inclusive paradigm that attempts to speak for and address the concerns of the disenfranchised, and in doing so have sought a method that encompasses the actual group voices. No other technique or formula has been more appropriate than narratives as a way of letting the 'Other' speak (p. 128).

Fundamentally, I have opted to use my privilege as a White educated researcher to deconstruct and critique systems of racialized oppression within higher education. My racial privilege grants me access to particular types of institutions, as well as both the social and financial capital to navigate these spaces in order to conduct my dissertation research. I intend to also use that privilege to advocate for emancipatory changes and resource-sharing at the culmination of this dissertation. As Vanner (2015) states:

> Issues of inequality, violence, poverty, and oppression are among the most important challenges our inherently global society faces today. For Western researchers with unearned privilege and authority, to ignore these challenges is to reproduce and strengthen unequal structures… all feminists who are willing to critically examine themselves and their privilege should respond to the call with humility, openness, and eagerness to work together and learn from each other (p. 9-10).

To underscore Vanner's point, the process of conducting the research for this dissertation involved reflexivity, critique, and self-questioning throughout to ensure that my aims aligned with my critical stance as a White educational researcher.

Trustworthiness

To establish trustworthiness, I focus primarily on establishing *credibility*, which Shenton (2004) notes is the equivalent in qualitative research of positivist *internal validity*. Shenton (2004) describes the importance of learning and gathering information about the participating organization prior to the study in order to provide context for the interviews as a strategy for establishing credibility. I conducted conversations with the Director of the Bridge Program Office to learn about its structure and programming, as well as its day-to-day functions and staffing. In those conversations, I asked the Director to reflect on both the strengths and

weaknesses of the program as she perceives them. These conversations over the month leading up to the interviews provided valuable feedback about the Bridge Program.

Shenton (2004) also recommends the use of the researcher's reflective commentary as a means of establishing credibility. I used analytic memo writing as a means of reflection throughout the interview and data analysis processes to consider emerging themes in the data. Memo writing enabled me to be cognizant of my own preconceptions or biases that emerge. For example, in one of my memos, I reflected on my impulse to collapse some of the students' experiences into one-dimensional stories, when this was antithetical to the aims of narrative analysis. Morse et al. (2002) stress the importance of engaging in reflective commentary in the interviewing and data analysis process in order to allow modifications or changes to the research process as needed. I especially relied on this reflective commentary when I was analyzing the narratives for research question 2 and looking for stories of *resistance* and *contradiction*. I had to check myself often for imposing my own notions of what *resistance* and *contradiction* look like on the interviewees, as opposed to listening to these themes as reported in their own voices.

CHAPTER 4: PARTICIPANT PROFILES

All 10 URM students were interviewed for approximately 60-90 minutes and participated in the hour-long focus groups. Each student was a current undergraduate student at Elmhill College, ranging in age from 20 to 23. The table below provides demographic information about the participants, and a descriptive profile of each participant follows. Some participants did not fill out the initial survey when they were recruited to participate in the interviews, so their exact age is not known. The purpose of each descriptive profile is to give shape and dimension to the students beyond their demographic information. In these profiles, I convey relevant information

about past educational experiences, racial identity, familial structures, extracurricular activities, descriptions of the interviewee as a child, self-identified challenges or perceived obstacles to their success (for example, some students revealed that they suffer from anxiety and / or depression). While I have elected to only provide a sampling of information that could be deemed "relevant" in the descriptive profiles, the inclusion of the profiles is intended to push back against the misguided inaccuracy that URM students from similar racial backgrounds all have similar life experiences as well.

Pseudonym	Age	Race	Major	Year
Kelly	20	Hispanic / Latinx	Criminal Justice	Sophomore
Alice	22	Hispanic / Latinx	English	Senior
Erin	21	Black / African American	Criminal Justice	Senior
Abbie	22	Hispanic / Latinx	Criminal Justice	Sophomore
Ana	21	Bi- or Multi-racial	Communications	Junior
Michelle	21	Hispanic / Latinx	Criminal Justice	Junior
Doris	Unknown	Black / African American	Theater	Sophomore

Leilani	22	Black / African American	Communications	Senior
Sam	Unknown	Black / African American	Ethnic Studies Major	Junior
Sara	Unknown	Black / African American	Business and Economics	Junior

Kelly

Kelly is a current sophomore at Elmhill College and is a Criminal Justice major. She grew up in Connecticut and is very active in college. She's an RA, a member of the Latinx Student Association, and works in the Bridge Program office. She also has two part-time retail jobs when she's not doing schoolwork. Kelly is a middle child and lived with her mom and three sisters growing up, and later with her stepdad as well. She describes her childhood as one where she did not have access to a lot of material resources; her mom struggled financially and worked several different jobs to make ends meet. In high school, Kelly played three different sports and also worked part time to help her mom out. She was also involved in the cadets in her high school, which is how she heard about Elmhill College and the Criminal Justice program at the university. Her mother comes from Puerto Rico, and Kelly identifies as Hispanic / Latinx.

Alice

Alice is a senior at Elmhill College and is an English major with both a theater and a history minor. She grew up right outside Springfield, in Holyoke, MA, and she's loved writing since she was a child. Alice identifies as Puerto Rican and is passionate about bringing poetry and writing

from Puerto Rican authors to the English department at Elmhill College. Alice was a member of Upward Bound in high school and is also a part of the TRIO program at Elmhill College Alice identifies as shy and having anxiety, and she is currently serving as an intern for Bridge Program where she helps with their annual literary publication that features students' creative writing.

Leilani

Leilani is a senior communications major who is very active in the TV studio at Elmhill College. She grew up in a city just 30 minutes from Elmhill College where she describes her high school experience as being "surrounded" by extended family members. Prior to college, she attended a technical high school. Leilani identifies as African American, loves watching Netflix, and colors as a stress reliever. Leilani credits the Bridge Program with pushing her to participate in a domestic exchange at a California state institution during her junior year.

Doris

Doris is a sophomore theater arts major who is involved in all aspects of theater, from playwrighting to lights to sound to costumes. She is also an ambassador for the Bridge Program as well as captain of the step team, and a member of both the Black Student Union and the Multicultural Association. She works on campus at the coffee shop as her work study assignment. Doris also comes from a small city 30 minutes away from Elmhill College, where she was in the inaugural class at a pilot performing arts high school. In her spare time, she continues to volunteer at her high school with their theater productions. Doris is a Bridge Program "legacy" – both her grandmother and her father participated in the program. Doris is the youngest in a family of three and said she was very quiet as a child and suffered from bad anxiety, which she helped address through theater. Doris self-identifies as Black.

Ana

Ana is a junior Criminal Justice major with two minors in Political Science and Spanish. She grew up in a small city 30 minutes away from Elmhill but was born in Puerto Rico and moved here when she was two years old. She originally went to a small charter high school, but then it was shut down and she enrolled in a larger public high school, where she was involved in Upward Bound. She credits her charter high school with instilling a sense of leadership in her because she had a lot of autonomy and decision-making in the activities that they planned. She has three siblings and identifies as a Hispanic woman. Ana shared that she has a learning disability and credits an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) with her excellent high school GPA. She has been a member of the Latinx Student Association on campus, and she also started her own salsa dancing club. During her sophomore year, Ana was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and had to withdraw from the institution and took courses online. Currently, she is back living on campus after receiving treatments.

Abbie

Abbie identifies as multiracial – half Puerto-Rican, half Cape Verdean. She's a junior communications major with a concentration in media arts and analysis, and she has a minor in Spanish. Abbie said that she was very shy as a kid, and that she has always gone to predominantly White schools. She has an older brother who lives in New York and she hails from a small city about 30 minutes from Elmhill College. She has a part time job working in the Bridge Program office and she was just accepted as a Bridge Program Ambassador. Previously, she was also on the step team. Abbie says that she takes a lot of pride in her racial identity, which was instilled in her by her parents.

Michelle

Michelle is a junior and a Critical Justice major, and she just recently added a second major in Political Science. She's been on the Dean's List during her entire undergraduate career. She self-identifies as Afro-Latina and she credits the Bridge Program with helping her further develop her racial identity. During her interview, she referenced anti-Blackness that she says is inherent in Dominican culture, and she said that this anti-Blackness really challenged her to have a positive self-identity. However, conversations during the Bridge Program really helped her to embrace and celebrate the "Afro" part of her Afro-Latina heritage. She's a student ambassador, a recruitment mentor for the Bridge Program, and a former peer counselor for the Bridge Program as well. She also sits on the Executive Board for the Black Student Union. She grew up in a small city 30 minutes from Elmhill College and went to a high school that was predominantly people of color. She self-identifies as very bubbly and outspoken, and she wants to be a lawyer.

Erin

Erin is a Criminal Justice and Political Science major with a minor in English. She grew up in Cambridge MA and went to the same charter school from kindergarten through 12th grade. She identifies as a Haitian American. She is currently taking a course called "Race, Ethnicity, and the Criminal Justice System" which has led her to think more about racial identity in relation to the US Census. Erin is an RA on campus, a member of the Multicultural Student Association and just recently was accepted to an internship program called the "DC Center" (an Elmhill College-sponsored program in Washington DC) where she will work with Homeland Security. Erin says that she is focused on her schoolwork and does not necessarily feel a strong community affiliation with Elmhill College, especially as she is from a part of the state that is not well-represented on campus.

Sam

Sam is a junior and is an Ethnic / Gender Studies major with a minor in Criminal Justice. He grew up about 15 minutes outside a small city in Connecticut and describes his K-12 education as very racially homogenous in that the majority of students were people of color. He self identifies as Black and Puerto-Rican and is the oldest of three sisters, who he is very protective of. Sam said that he's switched majors a lot and he is trying to figure out what he wants to do in life; college has been his dream his whole life, though. He played football in high school and said that his grades plummeted, so he said that he "recognized that he had to turn it around" and he attended summer school to graduate on time. Now he's been nominated for the honors program at Elmhill College and has been on the Dean's list.

Sara

Sara is a junior and a double major in business and economics. She is extremely involved on campus . She's the Vice President for the Black Student Union, the Public Relations Director for the Multicultural Student Association, the Vice President of the Step Team, and a recruitment mentor, peer counselor, and ambassador for the Bridge Program. She also works in the English department as a work study position. She was born in Cape Verde and moved to the United States when she was 13 years old. When she moved here, she did not speak English and had to navigate the language barrier on top of being at a predominantly White high school. It was important for Sara to share that she applied to 13 colleges - she got into all 13. She has nine siblings, seven of which are still in Cape Verde. Sara identifies as Cape Verdean and spoke about the challenges of only seeing one color her entire life – Black – and then moving to the US where she had a drastically different experience.

These profiles provide additional context about the students who participated in this dissertation study. It provides historical background on the students – where they are from, what their communities were like prior to enrolling at Elmhill College, and in some instances, what brought them to Elmhill College in the first place. It gives context to their participation in activities outside of the Bridge Program; extracurricular opportunities, internships, work study, academic programs. And, when it was provided, it gives additional perspective on their racial identity and how that does or does not show up in their day-to-day experiences. These brief profiles are intended to remind the reader that all of the students represent URM backgrounds, and that students with these racial identities have historically been flattened, simplified, exploited, or undervalued in educational research. But these profiles, in contrast, are aimed to give additional context to the students' lives as it aligns with the Deweyan *storying of experience*. In the following chapter, I will draw on the participants' lived experiences and narratives to identify themes of enduring relevance.

CHAPTER 5 – COMMON THEMES OF ENDURING RELEVANCE

The focus of this study was to explore the enduring relevance of a pre-college summer bridge program for URM students at a PWI, and to position those experiences within a larger CRT framework of *resistance* and *contradiction*. Chapter 5 addresses the first of my two research questions: *What is the enduring relevance of the summer bridge program for URM students as they transition into and through a PWI?* In analyzing each students' storying of their experiences at the suburban PWI, I found perspectives that were similarly aligned within the individual retellings. I have organized these aligned perspectives into five common themes that connect similarities within and across each student's story.

The five common themes from the data include: 1) introduction to on-campus resources and opportunities; 2) development of academic self-efficacy and skill-sets; 3) a sense of community 4) a safe space (or in CRT, a *counterspace*); and 5) supportive mentorship. The participants described how their participation in the Bridge program provided these resources. They also described how these five themes were relevant as they transitioned into and through Elmhill College which I describe in further detail below.

THEME 1: INTRODUCTION TO ON-CAMPUS RESOURCES AND OPPORTUNITIES

In this theme, I defined "introduction to on-campus resources and opportunities" as the ways in which the Bridge Program facilitated connections to various offices, resources, and professional and academic opportunities that would support the academic and interpersonal success of URM student participants. This theme demonstrated how the Bridge Program connected students with resources and opportunities on campus prior to their official enrollment in the fall semester. Over the course of their undergraduate career, the students continued to use the Bridge Program office and staff as a connection hub through which they could discover new opportunities, become more involved with different on-campus organizations, and learn about numerous on-campus resources. In this theme, *enduring relevance* often took on one of two distinct forms. In one form, the students described the introduction to on-campus resources or being "in the know" about various opportunities as giving them the upper hand, or the perceived sense that they were already ahead of the game when the semester started. In the other form, the students described their perceptions of their own assured failure had they not had the introduction to resources and opportunities facilitated by the Bridge Program. In this case, they

describe the introduction to resources as a type of intervention that prevented what might have otherwise been an academic failure.

The Bridge Program schedule allotted time during which different offices on campus were invited to come and present for the Bridge Program participants. The presentations covered an array of content but were all widely intended to familiarize the Bridge Program participants with a number of offices and departments on campus that are available to support them throughout their undergraduate career. Some examples included a presentation given by the Financial Aid Office on how students can navigate their tuition bill and what different charges mean. Almost all URM students spoke of how impactful these presentations were in helping them become aware of all of the resources that were available to them. The URM students realized that they did not have to navigate every academic or personal challenge on their own.

Additionally, affiliation with the Bridge Program opened doors of opportunity for many URM students. One student described how she was offered an internship because her Bridge Program affiliation- and therefore, the fact that she had participated in a rigorous academic program- gave her an elevated status in her professor's mind.

For URM students (especially first-generation URM students), understanding the breadth of resources that are available to help them through their college career contributes to their sense of academic self-efficacy and mitigate the negative impact of stereotype threat. In other words, if a URM student is academically struggling and does not know about resources that are available to help them, they might view this struggle as evidence that they do not "belong" in higher education and disengage from their studies.

Introduction to on-campus resources

When asked about how the Bridge Program impacted her academics, Sara talked about the points of connection that the Program had facilitated:

> … all the people that they connected us with, they connected us to people from financial aid that, to this day, I bother every single day. We met people from Counseling Center, we met people from Diversity & Inclusion, they brought in people from Res Life. We met everybody from each department on this campus. So that was the connection they provided us with, that when we came here, we knew who, when to go to, when we have a problem, if we have a question… With all the resources that they have on campus, I feel like I knew everything! And people were asking us – they were surprised when they found out that we were first year because we knew every single thing on this campus. (II, p. 9)

In this quote, Sara showed feelings of pride and excitement that she was in a position of knowledge when it came to on-campus resources and opportunities. Here, she expressed excitement that she had those connections to rely on, as well as confidence that she knew where to go when she needs help. Sara also said ,"I knew the professors, I knew all the buildings already before I came into the academic year, so when I had my classes for my first year, I knew where I was going, I wasn't lost, you know?" (FG II, p. 9). This speaks to Sara's feeling of having a "leg up" when the academic year began, which put her in a position where she possessed specific institutional knowledge that other students might not have.

Similarly, Michelle pointed out that she was sure that she would not have found these resources if it were not for the Bridge Program:

> If I didn't do Bridge Program, I wouldn't ever have… used the Career Center, I think. And I think they helped me figure out the Reading Writing Center. So I would say that the overall community here didn't tell me about the resources they have on campus… Bridge Program told me that. When I came here, I already knew everything. I knew the library, I already knew where to go to sign up for classes, I already knew to sign up for a tutor. Stuff like that. They even have FAFSA sessions and stuff! (II, p. 14).

Michelle pointed to a lack of connection to campus resources that she perceived in non-Bridge Program participants, and specifically described the Bridge Program as being the connecting force. She expressed that the points of connection from the Bridge Program have continued to

serve her in the job opportunities that she secured. Often, URM students, especially first-generation college students, do not possess these particular kinds of navigational capital that can translate to college-going success. It is for this reason why the experiences of many Bridge Program participants having the 'upper hand' or being 'in the know' is critical to their success.

Introduction to opportunities

Quite a few of the students identified specific opportunities that opened up to them as a result of the Bridge Program. This relates to on-campus resources in that the students' affiliation with the Bridge Program is what facilitated these opportunities, and the students were aware that the opportunities existed because of the presentations that occurred during the summer program. For instance, Kelly said:

> Being a club vice president, scholarships, representing the Bridge Program on campus whenever we have things going on, being able to speak on panels… It's… Bridge Program. Even for classes, like my professors, like my freshman year, they were so like "Oh so you're a part of the Bridge Program"… I have ways to connect with them because already some professors know about Bridge Program. (II, p. 25)

Kelly expressed that an association with the Bridge Program was a door-opener both in terms of her extracurricular activities and with some of the faculty that she took classes with. In other words, her Bridge Program affiliation acted as a feather in her cap. Similarly, Doris said:

> I got to meet people in different departments. And that gave me a foot in the door because now they know me. When I got to the Career Center, the guy who runs the department, he knows me. And because we've built a connection, he's more open to helping me with my resume and getting a job and things like that (II, p. 21)

In this statement, Doris stated that her Bridge Program affiliation helped create a point of connection with the Career Center that has proven invaluable over time, and the idea of the Bridge Program helping her "get her foot in the door" spoke to the attributional benefit of "getting ahead".

For many URM students, especially first-generation URM students, an understanding of the full scope of resources that are available to support their academic and socio-emotional success was critical to their persistence in higher education. The Bridge Program specifically oriented URM students to these resources ongoingly and made them aware of opportunities that they could take advantage of for their personal and professional growth.

THEME 2: BUILDING ACADEMIC SELF-EFFICACY AND SKILLSETS

In this theme, I draw on Zajacova et. al.'s (2005) definition of "academic self-efficacy" as "students' confidence in their ability to carry out… academic tasks" (p. 67). This definition of academic self-efficacy is based on Bandura's theory of self-efficacy, or the belief that an individual has agency to produce desired outcomes (Bandura, 2008; Bandura & Schunk, 1981). I also defined "academic skillsets" as a particular set of aptitudes and practices students learn that support the likelihood of their academic success in college, such as time management or paper writing.

The Bridge Program supported the URM students in not only facilitating their development of important academic skillsets that set them up for success in college, but the programming also helped them to develop self-confidence in their own academic skills. Similar to the introduction to on-campus resources, the enduring relevance of the Bridge Program in regard to building academic self-efficacy and skill-sets either bolstered students with practical strategies and supported their confidence in a way that set them ahead of the curve, or alternatively, the students credited the academic skill-building as addressing missing knowledge that might have hindered their success in transitioning into and through college.

The bulk of the summer Bridge Program schedule was devoted to academics. There was a particular focus on the development of study skills and time management skills for the Bridge Program participants, and they also had tutors, Writing Center support, and the academic support center available to them. The Bridge Program faculty and administrators also celebrated academic achievement and provided accolades for particular academic accomplishments for the students. Taken together, these programmatic components set the expectation that the students would take their coursework and academic development seriously.

Development of academic skillsets

Many of the students shared that the academic skillsets that they learned during the Bridge Program were critical in facilitating the transition from high school to college. When I asked Leilani how she ended up at Elmhill College and how she found out about the Bridge Program, she said that the academic support of the Bridge Program reaffirmed her desire to attend. Leilani shared:

> I really needed that, that guidance to really prepare me for freshman year instead of just jumping from high school to college. Like, I don't know… I think if I had stopped right after high school and just waited to come to Elmhill College and just… I think I would have went right down. Yeah, like I took AP classes in high school, but it's still different. It helped me with time management… it just put in perspective how important managing your time really is, especially in college (II, p. 6)

Leilani recognized what she determines as a lack of "college-readiness". She identified that she needed additional academic support and believed that the guidance of the Bridge Program helped her to manage her time wisely. Here, she attributed the Bridge Program to help prepare her for college.

Similarly, Alice spoke specifically about the academic skills that she learned during the Bridge Program like time management or taking advantage of a professor's office hours:

> I learned… just because it's due in two weeks, never just wait two weeks, just do it now. Get it out of the way. I've learned… if I'm stuck or struggling, definitely reach out to the professor and say, 'Hey can you clarify this or when are your office hours so we can go over this again, because I didn't understand it.'… so that was a good strategy, just like never being scared to speak up. And it's a smaller classroom setting so it's like, it doesn't matter is *they* understand it as long as *you* understand the concepts, then that's all matters… and if you have great time management, college will be very easy for you (II, p. 9)

This quote from Alice reflected the importance of learning particular academic skillsets, such as time management, as well as how to advocate for herself with faculty members and in the classroom. Helping the students learn how to look ahead to budget out their time meant that they became practiced at juggling multiple academic priorities, which gave them a leg-up for the rest of their undergraduate career. When she was asked about the skills that the Bridge Program provided, Michelle said:

> I would say my writing skills weren't that good… but once I took the writing workshop it became so much better. Even like, my grammar, it made it better. And with the cultural geography class, oh yeah, it made me become much better at presentations (II, p. 11).

Michelle explicitly pointed to the academic programming during the Bridge Program that bolstered her skills during the rest of the academic year.

Development of academic self-efficacy

Almost all of the students who were interviewed described the confidence that they had in their own abilities to be academically successful at Elmhill College, and many described that as being directly relevant to their participation in the Bridge Program.

Sara spoke about the confidence and self-efficacy that the Bridge Program helped her to develop. Previously in her interview, she had spoken about how unfamiliar the college-going process was for her as a Cape Verdean immigrant. When asked if anything surprised her about the Bridge Program, she said:

> It's 15 weeks of work condensed into five weeks. I knew it was a lot, but I knew that I had to prove it to myself and to them that I could do this college thing. It wasn't a surprise to know that it was going to be a challenging program. But I knew that I had to prove to myself that I could do this, despite what I had been through, despite my past or any language barrier, I knew that I would be able to do this because there's no piece of paper or anything else that can determine my intelligence. (II, p. 8)

This quote from Sara showed that she felt that she had to prove something as an immigrant student, both to herself and to others. She credited the Bride Program with helping her develop the confidence that she could be successful in college, despite all of the hurdles that she faced in her K-12 experience. That confidence was relevant over the course of her college career as she reached for new opportunities.

Erin described how engaging in the academic skill-building specifically set her up for success during the academic year. She said, "My first class was Principles of Sociology. I wasn't… nervous because I already took college classes in the summer. So I'm just like, I know what to do" (II, p. 9). This transition into traditional college coursework was not as daunting for Erin because the Bridge Program helped her gain confidence in her academic abilities. This speaks directly to self-efficacy: Erin was able to be successful academically because she had gained confidence in her own ability to achieve success in the classroom space. Similarly, Ana said that the programs helped her master the dynamics of scheduling and time management, and then she then linked this to her own self-confidence in her ability to be successful at academic tasks. Ana shared:

> When I first started the school year, the actual school year, it was so easy for me because of the amount of work that was given in Bridge Program, it kind of, it prepared me for it. Like, it was so much work that when I first started the semester it was like, Oh this is work? This is not hard at all. It's so easy because… I already had that mindset. It's all because Summer Bridge built that mindset (II, p. 5)

Here, Ana referred to the leg-up that the academic skill-building provided, and the ways in which the development of those skills was relevant over time. Similarly, other students described the

feeling that when the school year started, they were "ahead of the game." Their workload during the traditional semester was not nearly as hard as what they had experienced during the Bridge Program, and that feeling of coming out ahead bolstered their academic self-efficacy.

The development of academic skillsets and self-efficacy in the Bridge Program supported the long-term academic success of many of the URM students who were interviewed. The students knew that they could always draw on the toolkit of academic skills that they had developed. This knowledge gave them self-confidence in their capability to tackle future academic challenges.

THEME THREE: SENSE OF COMMUNITY

In this theme, I defined a "sense of community" as the familial bonds that the URM students formed with each other and with the Bridge Program staff as a result of their participation in the Bridge Program. For URM students, connections with a campus community can mitigate these feelings of isolation and support feelings of belonging instead at PWIs. The data shows that in this theme, "sense of community" took on the forms of a sense of *familial community* and a sense of *racial affinity community*.

Almost every single participant discussed to some extent the challenges of being a student of color and navigating Elmhill College. Whether they spoke of feeling hyper-visible, or they spoke of feeling ignored, themes of feeling 'othered' or 'excluded' were present in most, if not all interviews. In contrast, when students described the Bridge Program community, they spoke to the feeling that they had an on-campus family. Their on-campus family extended to Bridge Program advisors, the peer counselors (PCs), members of their own cohort, and even past Bridge Program participants with whom some students had no other connection. An example of

this occurred when Sara said that when she sees another student on campus that she knows participated in the Bridge Program, she said "I don't have to know you, but you're family." Additionally, in the sense of community that many students described, there is a critical racial element. Though the Bridge Program advisors included individuals who identify as White, and White students participated in the Bridge Program as well, the vast majority of students (as well as the majority of the staff) came from minoritized backgrounds. Therefore, because the large majority of Bridge Program community members were URM individuals, there was a connection between a shared racial minoritized background and the sense of community that the Bridge Program facilitated.

The timing of the Bridge Program meant that the student participants were some of the only residents on the campus of Elmhill College during the summer. As such, many of the students discussed how they were in the racial majority for the first part of their college career – an experience that shifted dramatically once the fall semester started and they returned to a predominantly White campus. This meant that during the summer, participants were able to form peer groups that served as vital support structures during the fall when they then became the racial minority on campus. Almost all students described their connection to the Bridge Program community as a constant over the duration of their undergraduate career. Even though their closeness with that community ebbed and flowed, they described the community as rock-solid, foundational to their experience, and permanent.

Sense of familial community

Many of the URM students defined the Bridge Program community as a family. This was a comment that emerged again and again in the data – while the sense of a community can evolve and shift over time, the word "family" evokes a kind of timelessness, or an endurance in

and of itself. There's the notion that family is *always* family, which underscores the enduring relevance of the community ties that formed during the Bridge Program.

Sara said:

> When I came in, everybody knows you, everybody knows each other, because we're just so kind and we know what we're here for… When I say we have a family, I mean it. I have a family, every single person that we went through the program together… we're very close…. I call the Director "Mom", literally …. and that's what I think family is like. Family is someone you can count on anytime of the day. (II, p. 7)

Similarly, when asked what it was like to have people affiliated with the Bridge Program checking in on her, Doris shared:

> We're family. It's like finding a cousin. It's like, wow, we're family. Okay, that's cool. We go to the same office, we vent to the same people… It's so personal. It's like having aunts and uncles who are like, constantly looking out for you. (II, p. 15).

She goes on to describe a turning point moment in her Bridge Program experience where she realized how much she was "loved" by her Bridge Program family. She said, "People were caring about you. This is so personal… they were just rooting for us. You know, it was so odd. I've never had someone who wasn't family… care about you so much" (II, p. 17). Doris' language suggested that this community resembled family members that she could rely on looking out for their best interests.

Michelle stated:

> When you come to Bridge Program, you feel like you have a backbone, like, Oh I'm good. They got my back. When it comes to the sense of community, you know, your community has your back… it just comes from, like, loyalty, and you know, family… You feel safe, you feel secure, you feel reassured,… like, it's secureness. (II, p. 13)

The language of family and home used here by Michelle is remarkable. For the students to form that strong of a connection with their peers and mentors in six weeks spoke to the long-term sense of familial community that was facilitated by the programming and support structures that the Bridge Program provided. The words that the students associated with the family that they

find within the Bridge Program community – loyalty, security, kindness, advocacy, home – spoke to how many of them created or replicated systems of support within the Bridge Program that helped them feel like they belonged at Elmhill College. In particular, Michelle's evocation of a "backbone" referenced the centrality of the Bridge Program in her orbit. The Bridge Program community was- literally- what supported her and what helped her to remain upright.

The sense of familial community that the Bridge Program facilitated was a game-changer for many of the participants in terms of their persistence at Elmhill College. In fact, several of the students said in their interviews that the Bridge Program community was one of the sole reasons that they were still at Elmhill College. Many of the students came from cultural backgrounds where family and community were prioritized; when these students left their homes for college, the Bridge Program was able to fill that absence of family in many ways.

Sense of racial affinity community

Sense of community also took the form of a racial affinity community for many of the URM students I interviewed. The value of racial affinity communities and / or other culturally affirming groups at PWIs has been well-documented to positively influence the likelihood of a URM student persisting by affirming a student's cultural background and facilitating a sense of belonging at an institution that might otherwise feel unwelcoming (Harper & Quaye, 2007; Museus & Quaye, 2009; Thelamour et al., 2019). At Elmhill College, there are several cultural affinity groups (e.g., the Black Student Union), but the Bridge Program is one of the few communities that supports URM students writ large. When asked about the Bridge Program community, Sam said:

> Especially when all that racial stuff was happening on campus, like, it would have been way different for me if I didn't have any friends already coming into this semester.

> Especially friends of color…. As people of color when something like that happens… all we really have is each other. (II, p. 10-11).

Sam spoke about the nature of his community that is specifically formed around shared racial identity, and how that community was relevant over time. His language "when something like that happens" suggested that Sam anticipated racist incidents would continue to occur over his college career, but that his Bridge Program community of URM students was enduringly relevant and would get him through, even in the absence of other communities of support.

Leilani explained that the Bridge Program was both a combination of students from minoritized backgrounds and those who came from urban areas and therefore, shared similar life experiences. She said how important this was to her in terms of feeling like she belonged:

> [The Bridge Program] helped because I knew that I was going to be in a body of students that were of color and come from, you know, urban cities, and I can figure it out with them and not by myself…. When we got to the actual university, we still stuck together. Because I think we also felt like some things that we were talking about couldn't be understood by others…. Just how we came up from high school, where we grew up… (II, p. 8).

Leilani spoke to the enduring nature of the bonds that she initially formed during the Bridge Program that were in part based on a shared racial identity. To Leilani, that meant that there were particular life experiences that the Bridge Program students went through that "couldn't be understood by others." Here, Leilani implied that "others" means "White students." Leilani also spoke to the feeling of not having to navigate college alone and how much that meant to her.

Abbie talked about how the Bridge Program's sense of racial community made her feel comfort. She said "It was just… knowing that I could go to a place a just feel comfortable. And just talking to people that, like I said, who looked like me, talk like me, come from relatively the same place… (II, p. 13).Here, Abbie attributed her persistence at Elmhill College to the sense of a shared racial affinity community with her Bridge Program friends. The shared racial affinity

component of the Bridge Program was relevant in the way that Abbie implied she may not have stayed at Elmhill were it not for this key factor.

In conclusion, the racial affinity community that was facilitated by the Bridge Program was a relief to many of the URM students. They felt understood, seen, and valued, and the feelings of racial hypervisibility and marginalization were mitigated by this community connection.

THEME FOUR: A SAFE SPACE

In this fourth theme, I defined a "safe space" as a physical locale where the Bridge Program students could convene and not feel 'othered' or hypervisible on an otherwise predominantly White campus. By using the word "safe", this implied that other spaces at Elmhill College, including the classrooms, common areas, and dorms, felt racially hostile.

Every participant asserted that to some extent, the Bridge Program office came to represent a place for them where they could go when they did not feel welcome in other spaces on campus. Students spoke of feeling a sense of community in the physical space and of finding support there. They also described feeling respite from the fatigue of navigating other physical spaces on campus where they experienced racial microaggressions and racial battle fatigue. This description of the Bridge Program office as a safe space aligns with the description of CRT counterspaces, as described by Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) in their study on African-American students' experiences in racial campus climates. Solórzano et al. (2000) argued that "social counter-spaces were important because they afforded African American students with space, outside of the classroom confines, to vent their frustrations and to get to know others who shared their experiences of microaggressions and/or overt discrimination" (p. 70). The Bridge

Program office took on this function at Elmhill College, and it also served as a physical space where Bridge Program students could be in community with other students from racially minoritized backgrounds.

Whether the students opted to check in with their mentors in the office, or they assembled in the Bridge Program office with friends, or they utilized the space as a study zone, they regularly stopped in the Bridge Program office throughout the academic year following the completion of the six-week summer Bridge Program. The description of the Bridge Program as a safe space stood alone as a theme because many students spoke to the importance of having a physical space that felt like it was only for them, and how that came to represent one of the few safe spaces on campus (or, in other words, a *counterspace*). It also provides evidence that the URM students feel bolstered simply by *being* in the physical space of the Bridge Program office. Additionally, several students described key moments of crisis on campus that were directly connected to the Bridge Program community or experiences of racism. During this time, they describe the Bridge Program office as a kind of haven, away from the upheaval that was happening on the rest of the physical campus.

A physical community gathering place

The Bridge Program office served as a physical community gathering place in that it served as a *de facto* multicultural center at Elmhill College. With the aforementioned lack of a physical multicultural center, combined with the fact that the Bridge Program is comprised of almost entirely minoritized students, the Bridge Program office became a kind of physical stand-in for a multicultural center. Erin described visiting the office often for no particular purpose, but just to be in the space and around people. Erin said, “I was always there before class, or after class… doing my homework, using the printer. Yeah, I loved going there.” (II, p. 8). Erin

specifically used the phrase “loved going there”, even though she does not seem particularly attached to the activities that she engaged in while she was in the office. This represented the feeling of comfort that the space itself created for her, outside of the actual tasks she performed within that space.

To give some additional context to the Bridge Program office as a physical gathering place, I had the chance to observe the comings and goings when I was conducting interviews and focus groups on campus. There were large numbers of students coming in and out of the office at any given time of day, even early in the morning when the office had just opened. The ease and camaraderie with which the students and staff greeted each other spoke to the welcoming feel of the office space. Students would come in for myriad reasons. Some came in just to use a printer, did not greet anyone that I noticed, and left after ten minutes. Other students came in for the sole purpose of seeing who was in the office to socialize. Some students came in and ate food in the communal table, and one student sat quietly for an hour reading a book. All of this contributed to the sense that the Bridge Program Office was a community gathering space, especially for URM students.

A place of emotional respite

Other students described the Bridge Program office as serving as a ‘safe space’ in that it provided relief from stress and other feelings of marginalization. In this, they contrasted the safety felt within the physical Bridge Program with the feeling of unsafety that they might experience in other classrooms or dorms. The irony is that many students in their interview reported experiencing racially-motivated conflict on campus in a variety of physical locations, from their dorm common spaces, to their actual dorm rooms, to their work study locations, to their classrooms. This stands in stark contrast to the sense of emotional release that comes when

the students go to the Bridge Program office, where they do not feel as if they are constantly dodging conflict with White individuals. For example, Michelle described the significance of the Bridge Program office. She said, “The safe space! We have the Bridge Program office as a safe space you can go to whenever you feel like, ‘Oh I can’t deal with this right now’ I just go here” (II, p. 4). Similarly, Leilani described feeling that the Bridge Program office was a judgment-free zone. She talked about how she would often go into the office and sit at the communal tables and color doodles as a mental health coping strategy. She said, “Once I go in there, I can let loose. This is my place. Like, nobody will judge me” (II, p. 16).

Additionally, several students referenced times during their undergraduate career when they felt in crisis and sought the safety of the Bridge Program office as a sort of “port in the storm”. For example, during a series of racist incidents that were committed in the dorms in 2017, many students sought out the tangible safety they felt in the Bridge Program office because they did not feel safe in other physical spaces. As an example of the incidents that occurred, racial slurs were written on people’s dorm room doors, and small nooses were slipped under the dorm room doors occupied by URM students. The university launched an investigation and implemented zero-tolerance discrimination policies, and they also installed additional security cameras. Many of the URM students reported feeling hypervisible during this time because of their race and said that the Bridge Program office provided a space of solace. Sara said:

> Everything was happening… everybody that I talked to was scared, everybody was concerned about each other. But… we had the Bridge Program office that we can come (to) and vent and talk about things, how we feel and all those things (II, p. 5).

Here, Sara referred to the Bridge Program office as a haven a place where she and other Bridge Program community members could go to have honest conversations in a safe and supportive physical environment. The relevance of the Bridge Program office as a safe space meant that in

times of crises, the office could rise to the occasion to provide that sense of comfort and home to the students.

∫THEME FIVE: SUPPORTIVE MENTORSHIP

In this theme, I defined "supportive mentorship" as the relationship established between individuals where one individual has particular knowledge, skillsets, or navigational capital that they pass on to the other individual (in this case, the URM students that I interviewed). This sharing of knowledge is supportive in nature, in that it focuses on the assets that the URM students already possess before matriculating into the Bridge Program, and the mentorship is meant to orient the URM students to navigate different challenges that they might face at Elmhill College. The Bridge Program facilitated two different kinds of supportive mentorship for the URM students, one between the students and their Peer Counselors (PCs), and one between the students and their Bridge Program advisors.

The nature of the mentorship took on myriad forms for the URM students during their undergraduate careers. Every single one of the 10 URM students described strong connections with their mentors and the ways in which their mentor / mentee relationship has continued to evolve and be relevant for them at different junctures in their college career. The mentorship that was facilitated for these students because of their participation in the Bridge Program could be academic, navigational, relationship-oriented, or emotional (among other descriptors). All of the students at Elmhill College have a faculty advisor through their major, but the URM students barely spoke about these connections in their interviews. Instead, they described the supportive mentorship from their PCs and Bridge Program advisors as being important to them. In particular, many of these students reported that it was their mentors who helped them to navigate the challenges of being URM students at PWIs. Several students talked about feeling mentally

prepared to be in predominantly White spaces because the Bridge Program mentors told them about the nature of the campus racial climate and gave advice on how they might manage it. Regardless, the students all described the supportive mentorship as something that they could always rely on. Similarly, some of the students described the feeling that their PCs and Bridge Program advisors would always be "there for them".

One of the mentor groups was comprised of the Bridge Program Peer Counselors (PCs), who were current undergraduate students at Elmhill College who had previously participated in the Bridge Program and who were hired in subsequent years as mentors for the incoming cohort of Bridge Program participants.

The data showed that for the students, supportive mentorship took on three different forms. The first described the mentors in the role of *consultants*, the second described mentors in the role of *cheerleaders*, and the third described the mentors as *guides*. I will outline these three forms of supportive mentorship in further detail below.

Mentors as consultants

The URM students described the ways in which they relied on their Bridge Program advisors and PCs as consultants, in that they sought out their professional expertise and advice in how to navigate particular situations at Elmhill College. This role is in many ways similar to the theme that describes how the Bridge Program facilitated introductions to on-campus resources, but it also extends beyond. The Bridge Program advisors and PCs are one-on-one mentors. The URM students often described their PCs and Bridge Program advisors as consultants not just in the ways that they facilitated on-campus connections, but also as sounding boards for how to manage different situations and challenges.

For example, Alice spoke to an experience she had where she was struggling to communicate with an English professor during her first year. She felt targeted because the professor critiqued the way she wrote papers for the course and called her writing "not academic", despite Alice's multiple attempts to reach out and ask for help or attend the professor's office hours. Alice said, "She put me in a strong spot where I was like… I'm going to fail. Like, that was my mindset after that, I was… destroyed. Defeated." (II, p. 12). Alice said that her Bridge Program advisor let her cry in his office, gave her candy, and then helped her coordinate a meeting with the professor to address the challenges. Alice shared of that experience, "It kind of showed me that Bridge Program was there for you, no matter what." (II, p. 12) In this sentence, Alice specifically referred to her Bridge Program mentors and their enduring support. Alice went on to describe some of the practical strategies that she learned from her Bridge Program advisor to manage her relationships with the professor:

> They helped in that success, and actually supported me to keep going… [strategies] like keep in contact with her if I need help, and that something that I still have trouble with this day. With trying to, like, voice, to my professors, like I need help, I need all this support (II, p. 13).

In another example, many of the students talked about how the PCs and Bridge Program advisors served as consultants in what strategies to use to manage the racism that the students experienced at Elmhill College. Doris said:

> I remember the [peer counselors]… would tell us, you know, it's going to be a culture shock, you're going to get on campus and you're going to freeze up in that first moment that you step on campus… it's going to be hard.' But they prepared us so well for that, you know,… when you get overwhelmed, how to calm down and how to talk the situation out and I think the biggest part that they taught us during Bridge Program was trying to see things from other people's perspective (II, p. 17).

In this example, one could see how the URM students relied on their PCs and advisors as consultants ongoingly during their undergraduate careers. The nature of the advice in response to

challenging situations changed over the students' undergraduate career, but regardless, they described the sense that their advisors would always be there and always be willing to help guide them.

Mentors as cheerleaders

The URM students also described the ways in which they relied on their Bridge Program advisors and PCs as *cheerleaders*. They relied on their mentors to provide positive affirmation and encouragement, especially when they were struggling with self-doubt. Supportive mentorship in the form of cheerleading can provide valuable positive affirmation to counteract the negative feelings that URM students might experience as a result of feeling racially "othered".

Michelle described the cheerleading that she received from her Bridge Program advisors:

> They made me so comfortable, they made me feel so good about myself. Like, oh, you look good today. You did good! Or you got an A on this assignment! So it made me feel "Oh, I'm actually smart"… whatever my opinion is, it *does* matter (II, p. 8)

In this quote, Michelle referred to the kind of language her advisors use to demonstrate the support that they offered. Their cheerleading made her feel confident, academically successful, and that she mattered.

When asked about a time that she really enjoyed being in college, Sara spoke about how she developed self-confidence in college and she credits that in large part to the Bridge Program and the mentorship she received. Sara said:

> We have all the support that we need from our advisors… they motivate us to do things beyond what we would. The reason that I am who I am today, the reason that I put myself into so many challenges and I get through them is because I know that support I have with them will get me through anything I start (II, p. 5).

Sara went on to say:

> Having that support when you come into the academic year, you're going to have somebody to back you up… it was everything…. All I needed was somebody that could challenge, someone that could challenge me so I could prove it to myself that I can do this college thing. You know, because being first generation, I had no clue. (II, p. 6).

In both of Sara's quotes, she spoke to her evolving ability to rise to various challenges she faced, in part because of the Bridge Program mentorship. She described the importance of having a single person "to motivate us to do things beyond what we would." This was especially relevant for Sara as a first-generation student who is not from this country. For Sara, having a mentor to go to over the duration of her college career was transformational because she knew that she did not have to navigate difficult challenges alone.

When both their PCs and their Bridge Program advisors gave the URM students positive reinforcement and affirmation, it helped their self-confidence and made them believe in their own efficacy. Some of the students said that they had not expected such sustained and positive engagement from their mentors during their undergraduate career. Further, many alluded to feeling that they could 'make it' in college because of the cheerleading they received. They articulated feelings of belonging, of importance, and of intelligence that came out of their mentors cheering them on.

Mentors as guides

Finally, the URM students also described the ways in which they rely on their Bridge Program advisors and PCs as *guides*. Outside of going to their PCs and Bridge Program advisors for advice and expertise, the URM students also said that their mentors 'tell it like it is' and 'will always be there' to help them figure things out. This spoke less to the direct, situational, and specific advice that the mentors-as-consultants provided and more to the ongoing foundational guidance that the students knew they could rely on; in other words, it was the enduring sense that

they had someone to help shepherd them through various situations and navigate challenges as they arose. This in turn created a more solid foundation for success for the URM students.

For example, Sam said that he formed a strong connection with his Bridge Program advisor early on in his experience, and that relationship has endured during his undergraduate career. Sam said:

> I still will text him to this day and he will respond to me… we had a good relationship just because I felt like, not only me but most of the guys in Bridge Program, we felt like he could understand us. And he was always real about everything, like he never sugarcoated anything. He always told us what it was like and that's what we appreciated. (II, p. 9).

Similarly, Ana said:

> "I will always go to [my peer counselor] like… I could still reach out and be like, hey, I have a couple questions. And she'll be right there. And she's like, always supportive. And if I was ever to need help with like, studying before the test or help me write a paper so she can read it and edit it for me… she'll always be right there."

Ana's sense that her PC will always "be right there" and that "she can still reach out" spoke to the enduring nature of their mentor / mentee relationship. This represented another support structure that Ana could count on to help her navigate Elmhill College. For both these students, they relied frequently on their PCs to mentor them through particular challenges at Elmhill College.

The URM students referenced their mentors as 'guides' through the duration of their undergraduate career. This supportive mentorship spoke to the feeling that they could always rely on their PCs and Bridge Program advisors to be there, to offer support, to help them navigate tricky situations, and to clarify questions. The concept of *guide* differs slightly from *consultant* in that, while a consultant provides advice that might be situational or professional in nature, a guide *shows the way*. A guide is a trusted counselor. The examples above spoke to the

level of trust that students placed in their mentors beyond helpful or practical advice. The students described how their mentors were a long-term, stable, trusted source. This is supported by the sense that the PCs and the Bridge Program advisors have been in these students' shoes. They not only had wisdom to provide, but that wisdom came from shared experience and understanding.

CONCLUSION

Research question 1 sought to understand the *enduring relevance* of the Bridge Program for 10 URM students at Elmhill College. Through the interviews and focus groups, I identified five key themes from the data that were relevant to the students' persistence through their undergraduate career. The first theme that emerged when students were asked to reflect on the enduring relevance of their experience in the Bridge Program was that the Bridge Program facilitated an introduction to on-campus resources and opportunities that the students might have not accessed, or even been aware of, on their own. The second theme that emerged was that the Bridge Program introduced them to particular aspects of academic "rigor" (nuances of paper writing, public speaking, etc.) and enabled their development of study and time management skills. Additionally, the Bridge Program helped them to develop their own academic self-efficacy, or their beliefs and confidence in their own ability to be academically successful in college. The third theme that emerged was a sense of community. For many of these students, this meant that they were among students that "looked like them" and could also relate to their lived experiences as people of color; they developed friends and peer groups before the fall semester, which helped them develop community affinities prior to an influx of predominantly White students. The fourth theme that emerged was that of the Bridge Program office as a

physical safe space. For many of the students, this meant that the Bridge Program office is an affinity space where they feel safe at a PWI; it is a space where they can go and receive support and affirmation from both their counselors and their peers, especially during challenging times. Finally, the fifth theme that emerged was that of supportive mentorship. Whether it was peer-to-peer mentorship that the Bridge Program facilitated or the mentorship from the Bridge Program staff members (who serve as advisors), URM students relied on their mentors for everything from emotional support to strategies to navigating the culture shock of a PWI.

The notion of *enduring relevance* suggests that there is a trajectory of relevance for these students within these different themes. By this, I mean that the forms of relevance, as well as the magnitude of relevance, might shift over time, but these themes both appear to have impacted and continue to impact the students. This chapter gives dimension and depth to the supports and interventions that the Bridge Program provides. The data also contributes to empirical research by illuminating how particular programming creates outcomes for URM students at PWIs. In Chapter 6, I will present at CRT composite counterstory that gives greater context to the URM students' experiences at a PWI, and in particular the ways in which they experience contradiction and resistance as a result of their racial identities.

CHAPTER 6: A COMPOSITE *COUNTERSTORY*

In 2017, a series of racist incidents were committed on the campus of Elmhill College. The racial incidents included hate speech written on the dorm doors of students of color, as well as small nooses being slipped under their doors. Amidst the fallout from those racist incidents that targeted groups of URM students on campus, senior administration on campus vowed to "do

better" by URM students. However, many stakeholders, and especially the URM students and their families, felt that the administration failed to adequately acknowledge the racial hostility on campus among faculty, staff, and students alike. Within that context, for the past three years, the President of Elmhill College has hosted a luncheon for URM students on campus to have informal conversations with them not only about their higher education experiences, but also to allow them to ask him questions and speak candidly. In this CCS, three students who are former Bridge Program participants have just left the luncheon with the President in the dining hall and have gone back to the Bridge Program office to decompress and check in with the Director, a Black woman named Lisa. It is late in the afternoon on Friday. Elle is a sophomore Criminal Justice major and identifies as Puerto Rican. Santi is a junior Communications major and identifies as Black. James is a junior English major and identifies as Afro-Dominican.

COUNTERSTORY

Santi, Elle, and James all enter the Bridge Program office and collapse around the small table in the center of the room. The Director, Lisa, hears them come in and pokes her head out of her cubicle. "Hi, guys!" she says cheerfully, "How'd it go? How was President Dylan?" In response, Santi heaves a huge sigh. "Same old, same old" she says, and Elle and James nod in agreement.

Lisa gets up out of her office chair and goes to sit with the three students at the table. It's Friday afternoon, and the Bridge Program office is empty except for Lisa, who was finishing up some work before heading out. All three of the students look visibly tired, and James in particular wears an expression of frustration. Elle is lost in her thoughts. Santi goes over to the office cupboard where the snacks are stashed and pulls out a package of cookies. She brings

them over to the table and shakes out a few from the package. Lisa looks around at the somber faces. “So what happened?” she asks. James finally speaks:

“It was just the same old photo opportunity. I thought that the President would actually be interested in hearing what we had to say, as, like, people of color, as Bridge Program participants. He started out by saying ‘Tell me about your experiences. How can I help? What can I do for you?” But he only wanted the photo opp. He doesn’t actually care about anything. And of course, the photographer was in the background clicking away, so I just know I’m going to show up on a banner in the next few weeks…’

James trails off. He’s referring to the big, bright banners that hang outdoors on the signposts and lampposts all around campus. They’re huge publicity photographs of students at Elmhill College… and many of them feature students of color who participated in the Bridge Program.

Santi laughs. “You know, they advertise so much diversity on those posters. And then you know, the students come here and attend events and they ask me like, ‘Oh, how’s campus? Is there a lot of Black people here?’ And the school, like they’re advertising diversity during orientation and all the posters that they have, but then you know, that’s not matching up when the students come on campus and they see all these White people and they’re like… where are all the Black people?”

Lisa is somber. She asks, “Do you feel like the President was listening to you guys when you told him about your experiences?”

Elle shakes her head. “No way. It was… it was for advertising. It didn’t feel like a legit conversation that he wanted to have. Honestly, if there are photographers there, I don’t take it seriously cause I feel like a real conversation is like… okay, let’s sit down in your office, let’s

talk face-to-face. But whenever there's a diversity event, all I see is photographers there, ready to take a picture and put it on a poster, you know?"

James is in agreement. "I mean, I tried to tell him how hard it is, being Afro-Dominican on this campus. Feeling like everyone's looking at me all the time, or judging me for my accent, or what I say in class. That sticks with me all of the time. I don't want people staring at me."

Elle says, "I'm so tired of the staring. There's always staring… it's constant. It's just like, why do you have to stare, like, I know it's because of the color of our skin, not because we're being loud or whatnot. Like I always feel judged. And just like, I don't feel free being here."

Santi speaks up: "I told him about the time in our Race & Ethnicity class that we had this conversation about the use of the 'n word'. This White girl asked about it, and the professor, like, let it happen. And I spoke up in class, but it felt really awkward because there were only three people of color in the class. But like… it's a class full of White people, and I felt like I had to speak up. So I *did* say something. I was like "What makes you feel like you have the right to speak that?" And I told President Dylan this… I told him exactly what it's like. You go into different classes, you're the only person of color, everybody's kind of staring at you, and you're asked to speak on this stuff. And if you stay quiet, they're gonna express opinions anyway."

James nods his head in agreement. "I've had my professors ask me to speak on things that I don't know about, that I have no idea what they are, just because I'm a person of color. I feel like me being the only person, they're always looking to me to want to talk about it. And I'm not playing. Like, I'm going to speak for myself and my experience and that's it. I'm paying for this seat. If all the White kids have an issue, they can talk about it amongst themselves, they can figure it out how they all want, but I'm the only one who seems to have no problem voicing my

opinion and no problem saying, “Okay Professor, this is what it is.” That’s their problem, not mine.”

Elle chimes in: “I’ve felt that same way in my criminal justice classes… like, not knowing when to speak up, but wanting to speak up. Like in a lot of my criminal justice classes, sometimes I just stay quiet because my classmates are, like, gonna be the police officers that we have. And like, it’s just sad because if I try to speak on these issues… it’s like we’re pro-Black and immediately no one will listen to us.”

Lisa asks, “Is that really how it is over in CJ?”

Elle nods. “It’s just sad that it’s still an ongoing issue. And at least for like, the Criminal Justice department, having different students voice their opinions, it’s just like, okay, well… they think race is not an issue. So when they have their opinions in class, it’s interesting to know that like, some people really have no knowledge of racism or understand *why* it’s going on. And that’s why Criminal Justice just doesn’t have it in the curriculum, even though it’s still an issue and it will forever be an issue!”

Santi adds, “You know, I took a CJ class, like, freshman year, and I know one of the professors was like, trying to be supportive, but she was so ignorant. I feel like… they do this in a way to try and cover themselves, like not to see the real truth. Like this professor, she speaks about like ‘Oh well, Black people have been through so much’ and like talked about Thurgood Marshall and stuff, but before coming here, she was a prosecutor. And this is what we realized… like, she was a prosecutor prosecuting Black people in Worcester. Like, prosecutors are the main people incarcerating people of color. And she talks about when she was like, a prosecutor, and she was like ‘Yeah I put people in jail’ and it’s like yeah, you’re coming with the facts, but WE are the people that you’ve been putting in jail. And she obviously doesn’t speak about that

specifically. And it's like… your story doesn't back up. So sometimes it's like, do you even really understand? Or are you just trying to make it *seem* like you understand?"

Lisa interjects, "Did you tell President Dylan about this? About any of this?" to which Santi shakes her head no. "What am I gonna say to him?" Elle chimes in, "He already knows. There's no way he can't know about this. We've done these lunches with him for three years. Has anything changed?"

Santi says, "It's funny because he's a minority. Like, he's Mexican, he came from a low-income background, but it's like… why does it feel like he doesn't care?" She is quiet and after a while, grabs another cookie off the table.

Elle echoes, "I know he's Mexican, but he forgets. He forgets what it's like to be at a school like Elmhill. He's not on our side. He forgets where he came from, he forgets what it took for him to get to where he is. And once he got there, he pretends none of it existed, because he's where he wants to be. And instead of understanding and having compassion for what we're going through here, with all the microaggressions and racist stuff, he's just like 'Well, if I can do it, you can do it, but you're gonna have to figure it out.'"

James agrees: " Like right now, this is when I feel disconnected. Like, I don't go to the events or anything for the most part, because I don't feel like the events are meant for me, or for the people like me. And it's not something I want to be a part of. Like, I don't care, they clearly haven't done anything for us for the last four years, they make it seem like they have, but I don't see it, personally."

Lisa is quiet for a moment. "That must have been hard," she says, "Sharing these experiences with him and feeling like it goes in one ear and out the other."

James says: “You know, it’s the same old shit we always see. Any time we think that we get to go to an event that’s just for us, it’s never for real.”

Santi agrees. “They’ll have these conversations about the minorities, and just like hearing their points of view is interesting. And then it’s like… you feel like you don’t have a voice because then it’s like, you’re making it about *you*. When it’s like… no, this is just what I go through on a daily basis. *You* don’t go through that and you wouldn’t understand, like, our position, and how we feel personally. So it’s just like, you have to sit there and just listen and you have to bite your tongue because you can’t make somebody understand where you’re coming from.”

James adds, “When we try to raise awareness around something that is happening, it’s either that we’re trying to look for attention, or we’re just dragging things too far.”

Santi responds, “And that builds up! What are those… microaggressions? They’re so small. But they build up sometimes and it’s very frustrating for us, but like, addressing them addressing it to others, they don’t see the point because it’s so small. Or they think, you’re making a big deal out of it. Small microaggressions really affect us. They stick with us.”

Elle shakes her head. “Sometimes it feels like nothing on campus is *for* us. You know?”

Santi laughs ruefully. “Remember the Ubuntu Honors Ceremony last year?”

The Ubuntu Honors Ceremony was historically an event at Elmhill where students of color are invited to a fancy dinner and are given academic awards. In the recent years, the administration required White students to be included in the Ubuntu Honors Ceremony.

Elle says, “I can’t even. It’s the same thing. You think you get to feel special for one minute, you think you’re going to be recognized… nah. At Ubuntu, I got nominated, I dressed up so nice, I was ready for my certificate. It was such a big deal. And they gave those scarves in

those beautiful African prints to students. And then, you know, there are White kids walking around with those African scarves. Like, it was *made* for students of color to be recognized on campus, but we just can't leave any White students out, even though this campus was built for them! Like… that would be discrimination, to leave them out. But the White kids in those scarves…"

James said: "Like, we can't say no to them. Like, we can't leave them out, but they can leave us out. It's like every little thing, you know, they have to get their foot in. But there are so many events on campus where we don't go… either we're not invited or we're not comfortable when we're there."

The students all nod their head in agreement. The office is quiet for a while. As it's a late afternoon, students are back in their dorms or off-campus. When Santi, Elle, and James came into the office, Lisa had been in the process of putting on her hat and gloves, but she takes them off again to signal that she's there to listen.

After a while, Elle says, "You know, it's funny, cause like, at first I wouldn't have ever talked about this with White people, but I've started talking to my suitemates about this stuff."

The other two students look surprised. "Really?" asks Santi.

Elle says, "Yeah, for real. It got to a point where there was just so much going on all the time, and I like them and respect them, and so I just started talking about stuff that I dealt with on campus. About being the only woman of color in my classes, about the stares… and they, they're trying. My suitemates. Which is so ironic, because I never in a million years pictured having these conversations with other women that are White and that they would understand. And they're *really* trying. Like, they've been watching videos, asking questions, like, how would you want us to go about this? And it's like why can't everybody do that?"

Lisa says, “That must be a relief, in some ways.”

Elle says, “Yeah, it is. Because like, I feel like all the time, I’m supposed to walk in this room and present myself a certain way and be a woman with confidence in order for people to respect me. And I have to watch how I move, how I talk, how I do things, and why I do things the way I do things. And I have to think like, oh, I don’t want to make the White kids uncomfortable because then I don’t want to be put in a position where it’s an altercation. And a constant battle every day. So like, knowing that they do try to understand, they respect me… it’s… it’s good.”

Santi says: “I feel like because there are more kid of color on campus, like, we’re more empowered, maybe. Because there are more of us, and we’re vocal, and after the racial incidents, we’re not scared to speak up, and like, the administrators know that, like the President knows that.”

Elle says, “You know, I talk a lot of pride in where I come from, being Puerto Rican… and my parents instilled that in me and my brother. They would always tell us, be proud of who you are. And they told me, even if you go to a predominantly White school, just be proud of you are and own up to who you are.”

Lisa nods. “You *should* feel empowered,” she says, “This is your campus too.”

James agrees. “You know, when the racial stuff happened, we went and protested at Elmhill Hall and the President was there…. And that felt good. It felt like I was actually a part of something. It made me feel like I was part of something that was bigger than myself… useful, I guess.”

Elle shifts in her seat. “You know, even though the racial incidents were horrible… race has definitely been talked about more. Like, students took everything to social media so quickly,

posted it, voiced our opinions and voiced how we felt. And in the classes too, I mean. There've definitely been more texts and things in our curriculum that we're looking at… even if it's not in the textbook, we'll, like, use an outside source in the class and we talk about how race is connected to the subject at hand."

James agrees, "Yeah, because like, who knows? If it wasn't in the curriculum, who knows if these White people would actually get the information. Sometimes it's like… basically the curriculum forces them to learn our stories and grow that way… which is good, because hell knows I'm not always up for teaching them."

Everyone laughs in response to this.

Santi agrees. "It's interesting to know like, some people really have no knowledge of what's going on, or like *why* it's going on."

It's quiet for a while as the students and Lisa sit, lost in their thoughts. Lisa eventually smiles. "That's important, right? That's an important step." They nod.

Elle thinks for a while. Then she says, "For one of my comp lit classes, I wanted to write something in response to Hurricane Maria. So I wrote a poem… because my family was there, and I needed to process it, and I wanted to write in both English and Spanish, and I used images, and I got to take those two voices and put it into one. It was so interesting to me. And I don't know, I just got to put my identity in it. Because I feel that was very much a part of me, and I don't like, get to show that at a college that is predominantly White. And it's really hard to just, be yourself sometimes, or find other people that you identify with."

She is silent for a while after this. Santi puts her hand on Elle's shoulder comfortingly. After a while, Elle goes on.

"But you know, even when they build this stuff into the curriculum, the students have to be willing to actually want to learn and be educated about it. Because there are some people I've witnessed even in classes, when we talk about curriculum and racism… and they… just, like, they weren't for it. They didn't want to be educated."

Santi says, "Remember the rally after the racial incidents? On the Green?"

James replies, "Oh yeah… the President's speech. I mean, what was that? He invited students to come up and say their piece, and like it was like, okay, Black Lives Matter, they were all saying Black Lives Matter. But then there were students in the crowd saying White Lives Matter, or All Lives Matter, and like, they didn't get the point, and he didn't say anything either."

"President Dylan?" Lisa asks.

James says, "Yeah, I mean, he sort of tried to shut it down, but not like he should have."

Elle says, "It's even the professors! Lisa, remember when I had that professor for my CJ class that was a former cop and I decided to write that paper about the Black Lives Matter movement?"

Lisa nods. "I remember. That was a *move*."

Elle says to the others, "I was in here, talking to Lisa, being like 'Should I write it, should I write it?' and finally, I just did. And the professor *hated* it. He gave me, like a C, and I knew it wasn't because the writing wasn't good. I worked so hard on that paper! But at the end of the day, I'm glad I wrote it."

James chimes in, "And you know of course when it's a White classmate, they don't always feel like they have to be putting in that much effort, because they expect a good grade no

matter what. And when I meet people of color, they actually want to put in the effort to go above and beyond."

Elle agrees, "We have to work ten times harder to even be noticed. Sometimes I'm so scared to talk, like, do I raise my hand? I don't want to be looked at as the dumb black girl in the room. But over time, it gets easier."

After a pause, Santi says, "I just feel like none of the administration or the faculty is on our side. Like, no one. Like so many of them are fake, so many of them faking this persona that they're all about diversity and inclusion, and they put on a good act…"

Elle says "Oh, no, I mean, I know people that are on our side, but I feel like they hold back. Or they're scared because, like, let's say they work in a department and they're worried about what their coworkers are going to say about them."

Santi responds, "Well, whatever their deal is, Bridge Program needs more support than they're getting. There's so much that goes on here, it's such a small organization and it's so intense, and the university is at fault for not helping this program as much as they should. And like, unless you're an athlete, like, Bridge Program is the only reason this school has any students of color here. And like, the university like isn't helping at all."

Elle chimes in, "Like, every brown kid on campus is part of this program."

James agrees. "They have so much trouble getting students of color here, and the banners with all these Black and Brown kids don't matter at all in convincing people that this campus is diverse if you have students watching about these racial incidents on the news. My brother wanted to come here and decided not to, and we were hearing that admissions was having so much trouble getting students of color."

Santi says, “Here at Elmhill, you get a lot of students who have *never* had to interact with students of color, which I remember blew my parents’ mind because they’re like *hoooooow*. But I had to see it from their perspective, coming from towns where they’re, like, they really didn’t have to socialize with people like me.”

Lisa nods. She grabs another cookie. “It happens,” she says simply.

James says, “Oh my god, and group projects. They’re so awkward sometimes because of that. Like, I had a group project last year and the whole group had a group chat that they didn’t put me in, and I was like…. Uh, okay, what do I do here?” I finally had to talk to the professor and like, force them to let me work on the project.”

At this point in time, a few students come in through the door, chatting and interrupting the small group at the table. The new students greet the three students at the table and then one asks Lisa, “Hey, is Tony in?”

Lisa responds, “No, he had to leave early for a family thing. What’s up? Can I help?”

The girl says, “No, I just got my paper back for Marketing and I got an A and I wanted to show him.”

Lisa beams. “That’s amazing, Roxy! I’m so proud of you.”

The girl is visibly excited. “He, like, talked me through it, so I just wanted to show him.”

Lisa responds, “Send him an email and stop by first thing Monday. He’s going to be so happy.” After this, the new students grab some cookies, say goodbye to everyone at the table and leave.

After the interruption, there’s a pause, and then Elle continues, “Like I was saying, I feel like the institution is just paying attention to everything else, and trying to grow without actually paying attention. And they’re so focused on growing that they’re leaving behind, like, the

organizations that support students of color. And they're not doing the greatest job, because there are so many people on campus who don't even know who these offices are or what they do. But then they're like, slapping a picture of a Black student, a Latino student, someone who's Muslim all over their college campus, just to say "Hey, we're diverse!" And it's not working."

Lisa is visibly tight-lipped during Elle's speech. She looks around the table, smiles a small smile, and then shakes her head ruefully. "I'm not going to say anything," she begins, "But you know this is a small space, the Bridge Program office. And we could use more support people. Y'all know how much I would love this organization to grow."

Santi jumps in, "Lisa, you don't have to say anything! We know how messed up it is that this office does all the work to bring in students of color, and like, it's still put on the back burner." She gestures to the cubicles. "Like, remember when I was sitting your cubicle crying and you were whispering to me like, *there aren't any walls, you just have to know that people can hear you*."

Both Lisa and Santi laugh. "Oh my god, I remember that," Lisa says.

Santi goes on. "You've got like, four computers and like, one printer, and just cubicles, and there are *so* many Bridge Program students. Every year we grow bigger and bigger and this space is so small. And it's so frustrating because like, this is our safe space. We should be able to freely enjoy our safe space and not have to be so crowded."

Elle says "They could do so much better by us, by the future Bridge Program students. Bridge Program needs to be recognized for what they've done over time. There are so many students that come here that *need* this space."

James says, "Remember a few years ago when they had that one student who was petitioning the administration to build a safe space on campus for students of color?"

Lisa laughs. “Oh, I remember!” she says.

James responds, “It was insane… like, he was like, there needs to be a place to go for the students of color on campus, like basically like a Black Student Union, and this bell rang in my head, and I was like ‘Uh, that’s Bridge Program. That’s the Bridge Program office, what are you talking about?’ Like, you don’t need to build the space, because it’s already here.”

Elle is quiet for a minute but then she said, “Lisa, it’s… it’s been you guys that have helped me shift this past semester. I’m like, getting it done, passing everything, enjoying my internship. I’m very surprised with myself… I feel like, from where I started to where I am now, and I’ve been surpassing my own… I don’t know, my own expectations. I think I needed someone that could challenge me, so I could prove to myself that I could do this college thing.”

Lisa scoots her chair over and puts her arm around Elle’s shoulders. “I’m so proud of all the work you’ve done, Elle. That’s not Bridge Program, that’s you.”

Elle continues, “But like, being first generation, I had no clue. I had no clue what it was like to come into college, I didn’t know what it was like to live on campus, what to bring. But what kept me here was Bridge Program… it was different, because I know I had the support system that I needed.”

Santi says, “But that’s the point, right? Like, our community. We’re family. At this school with all the White kids, we gotta find our family.”

Elle responds, “It’s more than that, though. Like, you guys helped me come out of my shell. And like, this year, when the semester came along, I was just… more comfortable on campus, being on campus, getting involved in clubs and stuff. I started building different connections with other students and like, bam, I have this whole family here on campus, and it’s a beautiful transition.”

James says, “Just like, knowing I have a place to go to where I feel comfortable… and talking to people who know me, who look like me, who come from the same place as me… that means a lot.” He grabs a few more cookies. “Okay, I gotta get to practice. Thanks, Lisa. Y’all are the best.” He gets up to leave and Elle and Santi get up as well.

“Be safe, you guys,” says Lisa, “I’ll see you on Monday.” The students all say goodbye and leave the Bridge Program office.

ANALYSIS OF COMPOSITE COUNTERSTORY

This CCS illustrated the experiences of three composite characters – Elle, Santi, and James – and the ways in which they developed strategies of *resistance* in response to racist challenges and contradictions at Elmhill College. I specifically relied on the conceptualization of *resistance* as “transformational resistance” (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001) which focuses on human agency, or the individual’s ability to counteract harmful forces and act on one’s own behalf. Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) describe this particular form of resistance as being relevant when the student “holds some level of awareness and critique of her or his oppressive conditions and structures of domination and must be at least somewhat motivated by a sense of social justice” (p. 319). In this CCS, the students’ conceptualization of resistance reflected an awareness of the gap between the ways things *are* and the way things *ought to be* at this PWI; this also spoke to the notion of contradiction, especially in instances where the university may have described a situation in a way that is at odds with the reality of the situation.

Within the CRT framework, this development of strategies of transformational resistance allowed the three students to resist dominant hegemonic forces that are at work in Elmhill College; they encountered these forces in the classroom spaces, in the attitudes of and

interactions with the faculty and students alike, in the curriculum, and in the senior level administration. In each of these areas, the students spoke of the contradictions they encountered that are inherent with PWIs. These contradictions are rooted in the fact that many higher education institutions (and in this case, Elmhill College) purport to value diversity and multiculturalism, but fail to adequately address, or even acknowledge, the embedded racism throughout the areas on their campus. In essence, the contradiction speaks to the Band-Aid approach that many higher education institutions use: they implement a quick fix solution that signals to the public that they value diversity, but these solutions fail to address or eradicate the root causes of institutional racism. Furthermore, the URM students saw the insufficient gesture for the contradiction it was: that is, institutions were unwilling to do the deep, structural work of addressing racism, and instead, they used quick fixes in the hopes that the "problem" would go away.

The CCS begins with a description of the contradictory nature of the President's Lunch. The students described the lunch as a hollow gesture on behalf of President Dylan to try and show that he cared about and is invested in the well-being of URM students at Elmhill College. While the President purported to want to hear about the students' experience, James described the entire event as "one big photo opportunity" and identified the dissonance that he experiences. On one hand, the President was asking about his experience, and on the other hand, the photographer was in the background taking pictures of the moment to ensure that it is on display in the future to demonstrate the President's commitment to diversity and equity. All three students described how they shared their challenging experiences both in and out of the classroom with the President, focusing on the contradictory feelings of both invisibility and hypervisibility. For example, James and Santi both talked about the constant feeling that

everyone was staring at them and that they were often asked to speak broadly about their experiences of people of color as the one lone URM student in their class. Santi in particular stated, "You go into different classes, you're the only person of color, everybody's kind of staring at you, and you're asked to speak on this stuff. And if you stay quiet, they're gonna express opinions anyway." In this, Santi described the contradictory nature of being a URM student in an almost entirely White class, and feeling that she was in a no-win situation whether she spoke up (hypervisibility) or stayed silent (invisibility). It also shows a lack of trust that the faculty member might manage the racialized dynamics properly. But here, both Santi and James also described strategies of transformational resistance in that both of them decided to speak up despite the challenging feelings of hypervisibility. James in particular stated that he resisted certain professors' impulses to ask him to speak broadly for all URM individuals:

> I'm not playing. I'm going to speak for myself and my experience and that's it. I'm paying for this seat. If the White kids have an issue, they can talk about it amongst themselves…. But I'm the only one who seems to have no problem voicing my opinions and no problem saying 'Okay Professor, this is what it is'.

In this statement, James was resisting dominant hegemonic forces that often treat the lived experiences of all URM populations as monolithic, as well as the impulse to not speak his truth.

In this retelling of their experiences in White-dominant classrooms, the URM students also described the contradictory nature of President Dylan being a URM individual, yet not being able or willing to empathize with their challenges at Elmhill College. They are perplexed because President Dylan is Mexican, yet, as a person of color, he appears unable to recognize the systemic barriers that exist for URM students, pointing to his own success as evidence that URM students can be successful if they simply work hard enough. The President is exhibiting a particular frame of colorblind racism that Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2013) refers to; *abstract liberalism*, or the notion that all individuals have equal opportunity to be successful (despite

glaring evidence of systemic racialized disenfranchisement in almost all American sectors, including educational, housing, employment, legal, etc.). This notion is complicated by the offender often espousing superficial liberal beliefs praising equity and diversity. Elle stated, "He forgets what it's like to be at Elmhill. He's not on our side. He forgets where he came from, he forgets what it took for him to get to where he is. And once he got there, he pretends none of it existed, because he's where he wants to be." She identified President Dylan's willful ignorance of the struggles that URM students at Elmhill faced, because he believed that if he was able to achieve his current position at President, other URM students could "make it" as well.

Another area of racialized contradiction in the CCS occurred when students then transitioned to talking about the contradictory nature of the Ubuntu Ceremony, an honors ceremony that originally recognized the accomplishments of URM students, but was since expanded to all students. The Ubuntu Ceremony at its origin represented an opportunity for URM students to celebrate their transformational resistance; perhaps they had achieved academic success despite the challenging predominantly White academic environment, where they might have experienced frequent racial microaggressions or macroaggressions. Or perhaps the Ubuntu Ceremony presented an opportunity for the URM students to resist the deficit narrative that often surrounds the academic success of minoritized students in higher education. But by requiring the Ubuntu Ceremony to be open to everyone, the contradiction was such that URM students now did not have a dedicated event when they could celebrate their achievements *in light of the additional racialized challenges that they face*. It became a ceremony that had less impact because it also celebrated White students. For URM students at PWIs, there is often the notion that many of the events, programming, and spaces are not "for them." Elle said of the ceremony, "it was *made* for students of color to be recognized on campus, but we just can't leave any White

students out, even though this campus was built for them…" to which James responds "But there are so many events on campus where we don't go… either we're not invited or we're not comfortable when we're there." The extension of the Ubuntu Ceremony to celebrate White student success only reinforced the notion that URM students cannot celebrate their own successes without also having to center White success as well. A strategy of resistance here might refer to the ways in which the Bridge Program advisors celebrate the academic and extracurricular successes of their student participants.

From there, the conversation shifted to a more direct discussion of the ways in which the three students began to develop strategies of transformational resistance to White hegemonic forces in their own circles. Elle talked about how refreshing it was to have frank and honest conversations with her White suitemates about race and racism. James said that it was important for him to go out and protest because it gave him a sense of purpose and agency. The students discussed together how there were more open discussions about racism in their classrooms on campus. And Elle also used the example of how she had been resisting the White-washed curriculum and syllabus- she described the poem that she wrote in both English and Spanish for an English class because it gave her a sense of pride. She also talked with Lisa about the paper that she decided to write on Black Lives Matter for a Criminal Justice class, knowing that the professor was not an advocate of BLM and would likely academically penalize her for writing it. Elle's ability to laugh with Lisa about this event showed evidence of transformational resistance in that she decided to speak her mind about racial injustice and write about it, even if she knew she would receive backlash from the faculty member. Elle said, "At the end of the day, I'm glad I wrote it." James then pointed out the contradiction of White students expecting to receive good grades for minimal work, when URM students often work extra hard to receive the same grade.

Elle said, “We have to work ten times harder to even be noticed,” which paraphrases an old adage among many communities of color that they have to work “twice as hard for half as much.”

From here, the counterstory shifted to the contradictory nature of institutional support for the Bridge Program, within the broader discussion of the importance of the Bridge Program for the three students. This is when the students picked apart the ways in which Elmhill College espoused valuing diversity and multiculturalism, but failed to provide resources to the Bridge Program, which singlehandedly recruits so many URM students. Lisa, the Bridge Program Director, also appeared “tight-lipped” in the CCS during this discussion because she agreed with the students, but she serves in a role as an institutional administrator. She recognized the bind she was in in that she cannot always affirm the students’ experience in the way that she might want to (or agree with herself) because she is acting on ‘behalf’ of the college. She might be concerned about her own job safety or about jeopardizing the Bridge Program if she spoke up about the administration’s failure to support the Bridge Program. The contradiction here also lay in the institutional failure to recognize the extra labor that fell on the Bridge Program staff and mentors, and then the subsequent failure to resource them accordingly. The Bridge Program was left to manage with the support structures they had, which were woefully stretched to accommodate the needs of the URM students.

The students also discussed the irony of an event that occurred recently where a URM student petitioned the senior administration to create a “safe space” on campus for all URM students. As the students discussed, it was evident that the space already exists, and it was the Bridge Program office. This event belied the institution’s ignorance at what the Bridge Program meant to many of the URM students who participated. As exemplified by the students who came

into the office and interrupt the conversation, the Bridge Program office had and has symbolic importance for the URM students. It is a safe space, a space where they can come and resist the hegemonic forces that exist right outside the door. It is a space where they can come find a feeling of family that many of them might be lacking and missing in college. In this space, they have a community with other students, but also with the support staff.

Roxy, the student who interrupted the conversation to show another Bridge Program advisor her paper is an example of how the Bridge Program students relied on the staff of the Bridge Program to uplift and support them. The fact that James, Santi, and Elle returned from the lunch to vent to Lisa the program director is evidence of how comfortable they felt in her presence. Their candor in their language as well as the way in which they treated Lisa as a combination of peer, friend, and mentor speaks to the close relationship that they had formed, which went beyond what one might typically expect from an academic advisor. The Bridge Program office came to represent all of these things and more to many of the URM students who participated, and it was a space where they could develop and strengthen their transformational resistance. Indeed, Elle finished the conversation by saying how surprised she was that she was doing well. She was doing well in her courses, with her internship, and enjoying her extracurricular activities. She saw this strategy of resistance as a function of the support that she received from the Bridge Program. Elle said, “I think I needed someone to challenge me, so I could prove to myself that I could do this college thing.” She went on to say, “What kept me here was Bridge Program… it was different because I know I had the support system that I needed.” Santi and James finished the CCS by commenting on how the Bridge Program community came to represent a family for them, and the office is a space where they feel comfortable with people “who look like them, who come from the same place as them” (as James puts it). Once again,

this spoke to the Bridge Program as a foundation for transformational resistance-building among the URM students who participated, which enabled them to resist the contradictory and harmful White-dominant forces at Elmhill College.

CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this narrative study was to understand the experiences of 10 URM students at a small suburban PWI who participated in one Bridge Program as a point of entry into the PWI. By understanding their experiences, practitioners are better positioned to create campus communities that are welcoming and affirming of URM students. Moreover, this adds to a body of emancipatory educational research in CRT that centers the experiences of URM students. Their experiences should inform the ways in which PWIs deconstruct and dismantle oppressive systems and hierarchies within their institution. The two research questions that undergird this study are as follows:

1) What is the enduring relevance of the summer bridge program for URM students as they transition into and through a PWI?
2) In what ways did the summer bridge program support these URM students in developing strategies of *resistance* to address the challenges and contradictions of their experiences at one PWI?

In relation to the first research question, I identified five themes of relevance when I conducted a narrative analysis to deconstruct the individual interviews and the focus group transcripts. The Bridge Program was relevant to the URM students' transition to and through their undergraduate career at Elmhill College in that it 1) introduced them to on-campus resources and opportunities 2) facilitated the development of academic self-efficacy and

academic skillsets 3) helped them develop a sense of community 4) provided a safe space, or a safe space of non-judgment and respite at a PWI where otherwise, their racial identity made them feel either hypervisible or invisible 5) provided supportive mentorship from both peer counselors and Bridge Program staff. Research question examined broader strategies of resistance in response to challenges and contradictions that the students experienced as racial minorities at Elmhill College. The Chapter 6 composite counterstory used data to merge the students' voices into a broader story that speaks to experiences of racial othering, developing transformational resistance, resisting dominant hegemonic racist forces, and the sense of contradiction that many URM students purport to feel when attending a PWI that claims to value 'diversity' and 'multiculturalism'. In particular, the findings from both chapters is underscored by literature on how the debate around affirmative action policies have augmented harmful narratives about the inherent 'belonging' of URM students in higher education (Arcidiacono et. al, 2015; Harper et. al, 2009). Additionally, the findings on the relevance of bridge programming is consistent with literature that explores factors that contribute to the enrollment and persistence of URM students at PWIs, as well as literature that narrates their lived experiences (Booker, 2016; Carter, 2007; Cheng, 2004; Cooper, 2009; Dennis et al., 2005; Gonzales et al., 2015; Grier-Reed, 2013; Harper, 2009; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Solórzano et. al, 2000). Finally, the findings on how URM students develop strategies of resistance as a result of the bridge programming is consistent with literature on CRT in education and the importance of using asset-based frameworks to describe their persistence in challenging racial campus climates.

The under enrollment and high attrition rates of URM students at PWIs are often a result of top-down administration and institutional stakeholders that make efforts to diversify their student body, but fall short in providing robust and comprehensive programming to support the students

through their college careers in light of their experiences of racialized othering. The Bridge Program in this study is an example of an on-campus resource that often goes far beyond the scope of its original programming as a summer program and instead steps into the void of comprehensive support structures for URM students at PWIs. In this case, the Bridge Program is designed solely to facilitate the transition for URM students into a PWI, but it ends up serving as a community space, a tutoring center, a mental health counseling space, a place of respite, and a family (among other things) for URM students throughout the duration of their career at the PWI. This illustrates two key points. First, the overburdening of an under-resourced program that ends up going far beyond the scope of its original mission. Second, the necessity of programs that support URM students holistically at PWIs, given their near-constant experiences with microaggressions, macroaggressions, and otherwise racist incidents from their White counterparts (including faculty, staff, and students alike).

OVERVIEW OF CHAPTER

The organization of this chapter will discuss the key findings from Chapters 5 and 6 separately. First, this Discussion chapter will explore the five themes from the research question that asks about the enduring relevance of the Bridge Program and will relate these five themes to the different types of Yosso's *community cultural wealth* (2005). Then, the chapter will analyze the implications of Chapter 6, which describes how Bridge participants develop strategies of resistance against racially-based challenges and contradictions at Elmhill College. This chapter will then discuss the implications of this research in the broader higher education landscape, where underrepresentation of URM students continues to be a pressing issue. I will include with recommendations for senior level administrators, program directors, and policy makers, as well

as provide directions for future research. Finally, I will discuss some of the limitations of the research.

DISCUSSION OF CHAPTER 5

The findings from Chapter 5 identified five key themes of the Bridge Program that were relevant to 10 URM Bridge Program participants as they moved into and through their undergraduate experience. These findings are consistent with the literature on key factors that influence the retention and persistence of URM students at PWIs writ large, especially in response to racially hostile campus climates. In Chapter 5, the five key themes of relevance that helped the URM students move into and through their undergraduate career aligned with Yosso's (2005) categories of community cultural wealth, which describes community-oriented capital that students develop to navigate their higher education experience. This speaks to the literature that describes how URM students who feel a sense of both academic success and of belonging can navigate a challenging campus racial climate.

As the first finding, the Bridge Program facilitated an introduction to on-campus resources and opportunities for many of the 10 URM students who were interviewed. This aligns with Yosso's (2005) definition of *navigational capital,* or capital that:

> … acknowledges individual agency within institutional constraints, but it also connects to social networks that facilitate community navigation through places and spaces including schools, the job market and the health care and judicial systems (p. 80).

For the interviewees, this capital took the form of knowing how to access particular resources that they might not have been able to, but that can be taken for granted by many other students (and in particular, White students). URM students reported that learning how to access the counseling center, the academic resource center, the tutoring center, the library, and learning

where to print their papers, was relevant to their undergraduate persistence. As an example, a group conversation during the Bridge Program about the Writing Center introduced students to Writing Center tutors, taught them how to schedule a Writing Center appointment online, showed them where the office is on campus, and briefed them on the range of editorial services that the Writing Center could provide. When this is conducted in a community conversation, it accomplishes two things. First, it destigmatizes the deficit framework around going to the Writing Center for help because it frames this resource as a way to get 'insider knowledge' and be academically successful as opposed to mitigating an academic shortcoming. Second, it lessens the likelihood that a URM student would have to find all this information on their own and become discouraged in seeking help.

Often, higher education institutions value individualism over collectivism, or rather, they emphasize that the student and the student alone is responsible for their education. This is reflected in academic policies that discourage peer collaboration, or a faculty member's reticence to offer group-work as an option. In this instance, that focus on individual performance could be overwhelming to a URM student in that they might feel discouraged from seeking writing help, or they might not have known that writing help is available to them at all. In contrast, the *enduring relevance* of the introduction to on-campus resources in that students learn not only that it is *okay* to utilize resources, but they learn *how* to access these resources ongoingly during their college career. This underscores the literature that describes how essential it is that URM students develop a strong academic foundation early in their college career.

Finally, several of the URM students discussed how an association with the Bridge Program itself also carried weight among campus stakeholders and helped them secure on-campus employment, internships, or study abroad opportunities that they might have known how

to access otherwise. This is an example of *social capital*, or, as Yosso describes, using social connections and community resources to gain opportunities or navigate through the institution. Some students used examples of their Bridge Program affiliation helping them. Kelly described a "domino effect" of opportunities that the Bridge Program connected her with, which speaks to the enduring nature of this theme. Opportunities – whether they be academic, extracurricular, leadership-oriented, or professional- often led expansively to further opportunities for the URM students during their college career.

Additionally, the themes of academic self-efficacy and skill-building that students reported – a combination of time management strategies and study skills that enabled them to feel that they were "on top" of their academic work and that they could be academically successful–represents a form of *navigational capital*. Strayhorn's (2011) study of the impact of summer bridge programs on academic self-efficacy and academic skills described how self-efficacy indicates "one's confidence in his or her ability to complete academic tasks successfully" (p. 153) while "academic skills measured participants' level of comfort with skills deemed necessary for academic success (e.g., reading/interpreting syllabi, asking professor questions)" (p. 153). In this dissertation study, the development of academic self-efficacy and skillsets in the Bridge Program supported URM students' self-confidence and resilience, which as Yosso (2005) argues, is also a marker of *navigational capital*. Any program that helps students develop strategies to be academically successful early on in their college career when faced with embedded racism in the curriculum or academic policies is teaching navigational capital. This is also referred to as *academic invulnerability* (Alva, 1991), or the ability of URM students to "sustain high levels of achievement, despite the presence of stressful events and

conditions that place them at risk of doing poorly at school and, ultimately, dropping out of school" (p. 19).

Moreover, the academic focus of the Bridge Program also enabled these students to develop *resistant capital*, or particular skills and ways of knowing that resist inequality and deficit notions of communities of color (Yosso, 2005) that are part of a harmful racial campus climate. Many of the URM students interviewed reported experiences of feeling hypervisible, othered, or looked down on in their predominantly White classes. But almost all of them said that the Bridge Program helped them gain confidence in their own academic skills, whether it was in public speaking, writing, or presentations. This, in turn, gave them confidence to speak up in class, as opposed to muting their voices out of intimidation or fear. In other words, this created the sense that they *belonged*. Michelle in particular worried at first that she would be judged because of her accent, and said that she expected to stay silent in her college classes. "But that didn't happen," she said, "My hand was up almost all of the time," referring to her class discussion contributions. Moreover, she reported that she wasn't afraid to speak out, because she knew the answers. Because the students were able to develop their academic skills in a supportive, inclusive environment during the Bridge Program, and later, when the fall semester started, they recognized that they could share their intelligence regardless of the stigma created in hegemonic classroom spaces. Many of the URM students resisted staying silent, which would have reinforced racial oppression, and asserted that they belonged in those academic spaces.

The theme of sense of community that the Bridge Program facilitated also speaks to different forms of cultural capital. Almost every student interviewed referred to the Bridge Program as being like family at some point in their interviews. Chatters et al. (1994) described these familial bonds with non-blood relations as "fictive kinship." Tierney and Venegas (2006)

document how in college, peers can form fictive kin networks to encourage their success. Many of the students spoke to the deep interpersonal connections that they had formed as a result of the Bridge Program. The heightened academic rigor of the program created an environment that prioritized community ways of knowing. In light of this, some of the URM students who were interviewed talked about how powerful it was to form study groups together and struggle through assignments as a collective. This was in contrast to the few students who kept to themselves and studied on their own. Instead of emphasizing individualism and competition, the Bridge Program peer mentors and staff encouraged community study and sharing of knowledge. This, combined with the pressure of successfully completing the Bridge Program classes in order to be admitted to the college, created a strong bond among the Bridge Program community.

For example, Sara described the bond of the Bridge Program being so powerful that when she saw people on campus who were also Bridge Program participants, but whom she didn't know, she still said "I might not know you, but you're family." The association of Bridge Program was enduringly relevant in that it created close ties on a campus that might otherwise feel hostile or lonely for URM students. As many of these students also reported having close-knit relationships with their actual families, the pseudo-family that was facilitated through the Bridge Program created that shared community – a home away from home. Yosso (2005) defines this form of community cultural wealth as *familial wealth*. Familial wealth "engages a commitment to community well-being and expands the concept of family to include a broader understanding of kinship" while also modeling "…lessons of caring, coping and providing (educación), which inform our emotional, moral, educational and occupational consciousness" (p. 79). Through familial wealth, individuals can rely on each other for moral support, and most

importantly, they understand that they do not have to face their struggles in isolation, which is a mindset that is critical to their academic success.

Additionally, the Bridge Program facilitated a sense of racial affinity community for the URM students who participated in this study. The value of racial affinity groups in supporting the persistence of URM students has been well-documented in educational scholarship (Tatum, 1997; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Museus & Quaye, 2009; Thelamour et al., 2019). For example, Tatum describes it as "racial clustering" in her 1997 book *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* and explains how students of color, and in particular, Black students, come together in predominantly White environments as a resistance strategy to find support and combat racism. To this end, the racial affinity community formed during the Bridge Program helped the URM students develop *resistant capital*, which is "grounded in a legacy of resistance to subordination" (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). In this vein, the URM students described how the racial affinity community mitigated their feelings of inferiority or being "othered". They could find shared cultural experiences within their peer group that affirmed their belonging at Elmhill College.

For many of the students, the Bridge Program office also provided a physical safe space or an environment where the URM students could feel at home at a predominantly White campus. In their study on the experiences of faculty of color at PWIs, Settles et al. (2019) described this tension as follows:

> Because of their minority group status and underrepresentation, faculty of color (FOC) are tokens and as such, are highly visible within the academy. Paradoxically, token status may result in their being made to feel simultaneously invisible (e.g., accomplishments are unimportant, lack of belonging) and hypervisible (e.g., heightened scrutiny) (p. 62).

In contrast, many students described the Bridge Program office as being a space where they could avoid judgment, find support, access resources, and go when they were struggling or in

crisis. Though White students who participate in the Bridge Program on occasion spent time in the Bridge Program office, the URM students who were interviewed reported that the majority of students there are students of color. Again, this experience of cultural affirmation within the physical confines of the Bridge Program office is in stark contrast to the racialized environment that most URM Bridge Program participants experienced at Elmhill College. The comfort and confirmation found in the Bridge Program spoke to multiple forms of capital, but in particular, *familial capital* and *resistant capital*.

The theme of the Bridge Program office as a safe space also speaks to the notion of CRT *counterspaces*, as originally theorized by Solórzano and Villalpando (1998) and Solórzano, Ceja and Yosso (2000). Just as CRT counterstories stand in opposition to the dominant "master narrative" regarding the experience of people of color, *counterspaces* represent spaces that are havens where people of color can resist dominant hegemonic forces and harmful racialized environments. As Schwartz (2014) clarifies:

> Counter-spaces are corollaries of counterstorying. Like this corollary, counter-spaces are an "other" and are "different from" institutionalized racist school spaces, which incorporate counterstories but are dimensionally larger (p. 112).

The Bridge Program's office was *enduringly relevant* in that the URM students could return to the physical space again and again to feel bolstered and supported. The findings of Solórzano, Ceja and Yosso's (2000) study on African-American students at PWIs suggested that "social counter-spaces were important because they afforded African American students with space, outside of the classroom confines, to vent their frustrations and to get to know others who shared their experiences of microaggressions and/or overt discrimination" and further, "the creation of such counter-spaces is an important strategy for minority students' academic survival" (p. 70).

The URM students were able to escape psychologically harmful spaces on campus by going to the Bridge Program office to find a sense of community with people from similar cultural backgrounds who were also challenged by the racial campus climate. The counterspace of the Bridge Program office also provided an environment where URM students felt as if their cultural backgrounds were recognized and celebrated, as opposed to either overly scrutinized or erased in predominantly White spaces.

Finally, the fifth theme of the Bridge Program was the supportive mentorship that students received, both from the Bridge Program staff members acting in an advisory capacity, and from the student peer counselors (PCs) who led the Bridge Program. The students described their supportive mentors in three different capacities; as consultants, cheerleaders, and guides. The URM students described supportive mentorship in a way that speaks to *navigational capital*, *social capital,* and *familial capital* (Yosso, 2005). The navigational capital that students develop because of the support of their mentors takes the form of their prowess in navigating social institutions that were not originally built to serve URM populations (Yosso, 2005). This speaks to the finding that supportive mentors act as both consultants and guides. Many of the students reported that enrolling in and starting classes at Elmhill College was the first time that they had been in a predominantly White learning environment, and the experience of being "the only one" in almost all of their classes, or being one of a handful of students of color in their dorms, was a shock to them. Yet, the PCs and Bridge Program staff prepared them for that shock. They not only problem-solved and provided practical strategies for how to handle and work through the resulting emotional challenges (mentors as consultants) but they also provided trusted, reliable council long-term (mentors as guides). For many students, it was critical that they could always rely on their mentors as guides to provide constant and enduring support and show them the way.

This again shows the passing down of both *navigational capital* and *resistant capital*. Students learned strategies for managing the potentially challenging predominantly White environments, and they were advised on how to stay true to themselves to resist the psychologically damaging forces of predominantly White spaces. Moreover, the students learned behavior that enabled them to challenge inequalities in navigating a predominantly White space, such as how to advocate for themselves when a prejudiced professor was challenging their academic performance.

The navigational capital that the URM students develop as a result of the Bridge Program mentorship is also closely tied to *social capital*, or "networks of people and community resources. These peer and other social contacts can provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society's institutions" (p. 79). This again relates to the finding that the mentors acted as both consultants and guides. The URM students describe how both the PCs and Bridge Program advisors provide a network of people from similar backgrounds who are able to provide counsel around various challenging topics. When Sara says, "The reason that I put myself into so many challenges and I get through them is because I know that support I have with [my advisors] will get me through anything I start", she is referring to not only the support that comes from her connection to the Bridge Program network, but also the sense that the social capital that they help her develop is enduring. She says that she will continue to put herself "into so many challenges" because she has faith that her Bridge Program community will catch her if she falters. She also has faith in the institutional knowledge of her Bridge Program mentors and their willingness to share their knowledge and strategies with her. Further, the sense that she can *always* rely on the emotional support that her mentors provide (as guides) gives her a sense of continuity and comfort.

Finally, mentors as cheerleaders facilitates the critical development of *familial capital* among the URM students. Familial capital as Yosso (2005) describes particularly emphasizes cultural ways of knowing that are passed down generationally. In this case, "generationally" would mean from either adult Bridge Program staff members to URM students, or from PCs (who are previous Bridge Program participants) to younger URM students. Familial capital models "…lessons of caring, coping and providing, which inform our emotional, moral, educational and occupational consciousness" (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). For example, Alice's interview where she relays the story of how her Bridge Program advisor supported her when she was struggling to communicate with one of her professors reflects the development of familial capital. Alice describes how she had a breakdown in the Bridge Program office, and her advisor let her cry, fed her candy, and reassured her. In this, her advisor modeled lessons of caring, coping, and positive affirmation *before* providing strategies and reminding Alice of how to utilize the resources on campus. Treating Alice as a person who was in emotional distress and required care, support, and affirmation before moving on to strategizing is how her Bridge Program advisor modeled familial care. It was only when Alice was reassured through that care and in a more emotionally stable position that she and her advisor were able to brainstorm ways to use her resources to address the challenge with her professor. Alice, in turn, might be in a position in the future where she similarly models care and compassion for future Bridge Program students, in addition to helping them strategize through challenges they face. Yosso (2005) explains that in familial capital, "isolation is minimized as families 'become connected with others around common issues' and realize they are 'not alone in dealing with their problems'" (p. 79). Within the framing of the Bridge Program community as "family", the Bridge Program advisors and PCs are the "older generation" that passes down wisdom and experience and

models compassion and holistic support for the "younger generation" of Bridge Program students.

DISCUSSION OF CHAPTER 6

In Chapter 6, I created a composite counterstory (CCS) guided by the tenets of CRT. The CCS was crafted out of the URM students' reported experiences, and I specifically focused the counterstory on how students developed strategies of resistance to manage racialized challenges and contradictions at Elmhill College, an institution that purports to value diversity and multiculturalism. Chapter 6 was intended to give more context to the experiences of URM students at PWIs as well as explore how the campus racial climate impacts the students' resilience and persistence. To reiterate the literature, campus racial climate, or the overall environment of the campus within the context of race and racism, has the potential to positively support the enrollment, retention, and persistence of URM students if it prioritizes diversity and representation in the curriculum, faculty, administrator, and student makeup, in the programming on campus, and in the mission itself of the institution (Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000; Hurtado et al., 1999). In this CCS, the students' testimonies were meant to illustrate the contradiction inherent with being a URM student at a PWI that claims to value diversity, equity and inclusion, yet still upholds White supremacist values, curriculum, and frameworks. The testimonies were also meant to describe how students learned strategies of a resistance as a result of their participation in the Bridge Program in order to navigate these contradictions.

As represented in the CCS, any overtures towards "inclusion" on behalf of Elmhill administrators or faculty felt hollow to most of these students. The students saw right through the superficial gestures from the campus president and recognized that, by and large, school

leadership did not intend to tackle embedded racism in the policies, practices, and curriculum in a way that would enact real change. As the URM students described it, the administration wanted to be *recognized* as going through the efforts to move towards diversity and equity, but either the administrators were not prepared to thoroughly analyze the ways in which racism was embedded in their institution, or they did not actually believe that racism was as a significant problem. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2013) describes these as two potential frames of colorblind racism; *abstract liberalism* and *minimization of racism*. Abstract liberalism describes the ways in which college leadership can frame:

> …race-related issues in the language of liberalism [so that they] can appear 'reasonable' and even 'moral' while opposing almost all practical approaches to deal with de facto racial inequality… [which] requires ignoring the multiple institutional and state-sponsored practices behind segregation and being unconcerned about these practices' negative consequences for minorities (p. 76).

This *abstract liberalism* perfectly exemplified in the students' retelling of their lunch with the campus president, who asks how he can "help them" but hasn't made any meaningful changes during his tenure, or in the students' description of their photographs being plastered all over campus on promotional materials to signal to prospective students that the institution is diverse. These administrative efforts are straw men—they have the appearance of being well-intentioned and equity-minded, but they do nothing to interrogate and dismantle structural racism.

In tandem, what Bonilla-Silva (2013) describes as *minimization of racism* suggests that racism and discrimination have 'improved', or that structural racism is no longer a determining factor in the life experiences of people of color. In Bonilla-Silva's (2013) words, minimization of racism regards "discrimination exclusively as all-out racist behavior, which, given the way 'new racism' practices operate in post-civil rights America, eliminates the bulk of racially motivated actions by individual whites and institutions by fiat" (p. 77-78). In essence, minimization of

racism seeks to explain away any racist harms that are enacted on URM individuals by faculty, administrators, or other students. The minimization accomplishes this by undermining the impact of these actions, as well as their cumulative effect. In the CCS, the president's unwillingness to respond to the counter-protesters yelling "All Lives Matter" at the student rally was an example of the minimization of racism. By not vocally condemning the "All Lives Matter" chant, which is understood as being in opposition to the mission of Black Lives Matter, the president condoned the sentiment that Black lives do not matter within the campus community. The president condoned this message both as an individual, and as a leader of an entire institution. Through a CRT lens, the president upholds White supremacy by not condemning racism. Similarly, when one student received a bad grade on a paper about Black Lives Matter and suspected that it was because her professor was a former police officer, explaining away her grade as simply an indicator of a badly written paper as opposed to an example of the professor's prejudice would be an example of minimization of racism.

Both abstract liberalism and minimization of racism speak to the contradictions that the URM students experience every day at Elmhill College, both inside and outside of the classroom. The students are acutely aware of the cumulative psychological impact of microaggressions as well as the feelings of both invisibility and hypervisibility because they are living in a white supremacist environment. By contrast, faculty, administrators and other students try to minimize that pain by claiming to support diversity and equality, but failing to show this support in actionable or structural ways.

In this CCS, the students described the ways that they were able to develop *strategies of resistance* (with the support of the Bridge Program) in order to fight back against this contradictory and harmful learning environment. For example, one student described how the

Bridge Program gave her the courage to speak up in class despite initial fears about her accent, or "sounding dumb". At a PWI that had a positive campus racial climate, this student might have felt supported in overcoming her concerns by the professor and her classmates, for example. But in this instance, she reported that it was the Bridge Program that had helped her in overcoming that fear, and in fact, she felt that the professor and her classmates looked down on her and it was that feeling of inadequacy that she was fighting against.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

One of the most critical takeaways of this study is that the Bridge Program at this particular PWI is serving in a number of roles, far beyond the scope of its original mission and structure, and the staff are severely under resourced. The Bridge Program serves to attract and recruit underrepresented students (the vast majority of them URM students) to Elmhill College, but it also serves a number of functions for students following their completion of the Bridge Program. It serves as a mentoring and community-building space, a point of connection for resources on campus, an academic support center, and a *de facto* multicultural center. URM students' connection to the program tends to extend far beyond the initial introduction and participation in the Bridge Program; by contrast, their affinity to the Bridge Program and its community is often centered as one of the most important and formative relationships on campus, and the Bridge Program's supports extend beyond what the students might receive from a faculty advisor or an RA, for example. Yet, despite the numerous roles that the Bridge Program serves in, as well as its criticality as a safe place and a point of connection for URM students at a PWI, the Bridge Program is distinctly underserved and under resourced from a financial and human resources standpoint. When entering into the Bridge Program space, one recognizes from

the physical dimensions of the office how challenged the staff are to provide resources to so many students. The office is far too small for the number of students it supports. The office staff is also overstretched to capacity. There are only two full-time staff members and a few graduate assistants, supporting multiple Bridge Program cohorts of 100+ students. It speaks to the resourcefulness of the Bridge Program staff that they are able to facilitate peer-to-peer networks, where Bridge Program participants serve as ambassadors and mentors for each incoming cohort of students, but the lack of funding for other full-time professional staff is problematic because the office staff are so stretched.

Educational research underscores the importance of providing academic support, mentorship, a sense of community, and affinity spaces for URM students at PWIs in order to facilitate their thriving and persistence (Cheng, 2004; Cooper, 2009; Dennis et al., 2005; Strayhorn, 2011; Swail & Thomas, 2006; Zajacova et al., 2005). It also reinforces the importance of providing these supports in a way that is not assimilationist, but instead builds on the community cultural wealth that many URM students possess (Yosso, 2005). In this instance, the Bridge Program office and the Bridge Program staff singularly provide all of these support structures in a community-oriented framework, with a shoestring budget in a tiny space.

This has serious implications for the longevity of the Bridge Program. When an office staff has to shoulder much work with a meager budget, the success of the program often hinges on a small number of committed staff members. Yet, with so much extra burden without support, the staff are at risk for being overextended and are ripe for burnout. Several of the students discussed how jarring it was when there was a critical staff turnover within the Bridge Program office (e.g., their Bridge Program advisor left). Based on the critical supports that the remaining

staff provide for so many students, it could be argued that another loss of a staff member would be devastating to the program's permanence.

The institution as a whole must acknowledge the incredible value of organizations like the Bridge Program, as well as the number of functions and roles that the program staff serve outside of their original mission / job descriptions. The Bridge Program is anecdotally responsible for bringing a large percentage of URM students to Elmhill College and, most critically, their connections to the Bridge Program are one of primary reasons that they *stay*. The Bridge Program is both a recruitment program and a retention program. As such, colleges who have bridge programs like Elmhill should provide more fiscal resources and staffing for the Bridge Program office. Moreover, a recognition and celebration of all that the Bridge Program accomplishes with incredibly limited bandwidth and resources would go a long way towards linking the program's success with the overall institutional success. As of now, many of the URM students who participate in Bridge feel at odds with the overall campus climate and with the faculty and administration. This is likely because the students recognize that an undervaluing of the Bridge Program represents an undervaluing of people of color on campus. If the institution is committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion, they must provide much-needed resources to organizations like Bridge Program that are already doing the hard labor to recruit and retain students of color.

While this study underscores the importance of adequately resourcing bridge programs that are similar to the one at Elmhill College, it also provides a roadmap that institutional stakeholders can use to create bridge programming that supports the community cultural wealth of URM students at PWIs. Below, I will outline some of the key programmatic recommendations for Bridge Program stakeholders and leaders.

Bridge Program Best Practices – Academic

First, a key component of the bridge program that facilitated the URM students' success was a rigorous academic focus within a community-support framework. The intense academic rigor helped acclimate the students to the demands of college coursework. The students were also able to take a range of interesting courses, including history and literature seminars. This deviates from many bridge programs that offer remedial Math and English courses that often are selected to "get students up to speed" with their academic skills. Remedial coursework leans on a deficit framework of URM students that they don't have the academic "chops" to be successful in higher education without an 'academic intervention'. A recommendation for practitioners of bridge programs is that they offer coursework that is engaging, trans-disciplinary and incorporates the stories of BIPOC individuals (so that URM students can see themselves reflected in the curriculum). Additionally, the Bridge Program should facilitate the building of practical academic skills for URM students and frame these skills as tools to enhance their academic success. Time management, presentation skills, and the process of conducting academic research should all be woven into the coursework and integrated with a sense of community. For example, students can be encouraged to form study groups or practice their presentations in pairs. This destigmatizes the development of their skillsets, and it reinforces their leaning on communities of support to enhance their academic success.

Additionally, if students found themselves feeling academically unprepared in the Bridge Program courses, they had an array of support systems in place to help them adapt, and moreover, they learned *how* to use these resources in a supportive, community-oriented environment. Using these resources (such as the Writing Center) was not framed as a deficit; it was framed as a way to develop navigational capital in higher education institutions. Successful

bridge programs should incorporate comprehensive programming in conjunction with campus resource centers in order to invest in the URM students' success and destigmatize asking for help from resource centers.

Finally, Bridge Program administrators and leaders should reject the all-too-prevalent deficit framing of many Bridge Programs that are seen as "necessary" in order to help URM students assimilate and be successfully at PWIs. For example, framing a Bridge Program as a fellowship, or as a community of scholars, is anchored in the community cultural wealth model and highlights the skills and ways of knowing that URM students already possess. The academic rigor of the courses should reflect the intensity of college coursework (no "remedial" coursework that implies URM students are academically underprepared). And relationship building with academic centers and support staff on campus before the semester begins can mitigate feelings of imposter syndrome which many URM students experience when they feel that their academic preparation is called into question.

Bridge Program Best Practices – Structures of support

In addition to the academic preparation provided by the Bridge Program at Elmhill College, much of the programming was designed to help URM students develop socio-emotional support systems that would facilitate their success in college. Many academic researchers have identified the development of a sense of community as critical in the persistence of URM students at PWIs (Cheng, 2004; Cooper, 2009). A sense of community reinforces the understanding that URM students are not alone in their challenges. The findings of this study show that the multiple communities of support that the Bridge Program facilitated had a significant impact on the mental well-being and persistence of the URM students who were interviewed. Therefore, recommendations for best practices includes providing both formal and

informal communities of support. For example, the Bridge Program at Elmhill College provided the URM students with access to two communities of support in the form of the Bridge Program advisors as well as the peer counselors (PCs). But the Bridge Program also hosted multiple cohort-building activities during the summer to facilitate the development of informal communities of support as well.

These communities were described by the students as essential when they began the fall semester and were among predominantly White peers. The students stayed in contact with their PCs as well as their Bridge Program advisors, and they often formed sustained friendships as a result of the informal communities that were created during the Bridge Program. Therefore, best practices would include numerous points of connection between the students and their PCs and Bridge Program advisors during their participation in the Bridge Program in order to establish and develop that relationship. This could look like weekly meetings between the students and their Bridge Program advisor, nightly informal check-ins with their PCs, and at least one form of outreach (text, email, phone call) between the PC and the student over the weekends when students return to their homes.

Additionally, recommendations for best practices include multiple cohort-building activities each day in order to encourage peer-to-peer relationships among the Bridge Program participants. These can be academic in nature, but they can also be fun opportunities for students to blow off steam (such as karaoke night, or a group hike). Two of the students who were interviewed said that because the Bridge Program activities weren't required, they opted out of participating because they had too much homework, and upon reflection, both students reported that they wished they'd participated more. Therefore, it would be a best practice to make these

events required to mitigate any feelings of awkwardness that students are experiencing which might result in them opting out of the activity.

Additionally to make the communities of support sustainable, the research also points to the need for regular Bridge-Program-centric activities during academic year. Several students expressed how much they missed their Bridge Program cohort after the completion of the Bridge Program, and they were frustrated at the lack of Bridge Program-sponsored events where they might have the opportunity to reconnect with the community. This is largely because of bandwidth issues within the Bridge Program office staff. As such, a recommendation would be to structure regular community-building activities throughout the academic year where students who are interested in that point of connection can participate and reconnect with each other.

Another recommendation for practice includes integrating more mental health counseling services directly into summer bridge programming. Only a few of the students spoke about using the counseling center, which was introduced as a resource during the Bridge Program. Yet, what was clear during the focus groups and interviews the need for counseling, especially group counseling, to help the URM students work through their experiences of racism at their PWI. During the two focus group interviews, there were several instances in which the tone and structure of the interview felt similar to a group therapy session. The participants I interviewed had the opportunity to share painful and vulnerable experiences that were met with support and affirmation from their peers. Additionally, the students had opportunities to dissect particularly challenging situations and strategize as a group in how to manage them. What was clear to me was that there was a need for this kind of safe space to help URM students develop mental health coping strategies to combat psychologically harmful phenomena like stereotype threat or racial

othering. As such, a recommendation for best practices is to integrate additional mental health counseling and coping strategies into bridge programming.

Fundamentally, the institution should be committed to a 'both/and' approach in supporting URM students who participate in this Bridge Program in persisting; this requires both a grassroots-level *and* support from administration to mitigate inequity and racism within the institution. While the university leadership can mandate the adoption of anti-racist practices and policies (such as a curriculum overhaul, continual anti-racism / anti-bias training for all staff and faculty, and reviewing HR processes to increase representation and longevity of BIPOC staff and faculty, shifting the embedded cultures and hierarchies at a PWI takes a long time. In the meantime, URM students will still likely experience the mental and emotional challenges of being underrepresented at a PWI (even as the administration and faculty work to shift the institutional climate). As such, the institution must be committed to both supporting the URM students in the present while also committing to the long-term work of dismantling racism that is embedded in their institution.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study adds to the already-existing literature on both factors that influence the retention of students of color at PWIs, as well as their experiences with the campus racial climate. However, given the limitations of the study, more research is warranted on the relevance of summer bridge programs, especially as they can perform such a vital role in supporting URM students' persistence. What Works Clearinghouse deemed only a handful of quantitative studies on the impact of a Bridge Program to be "academically rigorous" enough (although this represents a prominent belief in educational research that frames quantitative data as being the

most “valid”). But as this study revealed, the Bridge Program is relevant in a number of ways that resonate with URM students far beyond gains to their GPA. This study identified five separate themes of relevance that the students identified in their Bridge Program experience, and each category is in and of itself worthy of future research. Understanding how Bridge Programs facilitate a sense of community for URM students is its own study, especially as it might relate to other cultural communities that have been formed prior to the students enrolling in a PWI; were the conditions similar in that forming a sense of community in a predominantly White space was an act of resistance? In the same vein, understanding how URM students develop a sense of academic self-efficacy and skill-building is critical, especially when it uses an asset-based framework instead of drawing on a too-prominent deficit framework around URM students in PWIs. Much research around the positive academic development of URM students contrasts it to the “deficits” that they’ve been exposed to in their K-12 system. This body of research often makes assumptions about URM students’ ways of knowing, and it also perpetuates a White supremacist way of thinking around what constitutes “academic rigor”. Finally, it assumes that in order for URM students to make progress and “academically develop”, they have to learn to speak what Delpit (1988) refers to as “the culture of power”, or they have to assimilate into White hegemonic forms of “academic excellence”. Therefore, studies on academic self-efficacy and skill-building of URM students that incorporate Yosso’s (2005) frameworks of cultural community wealth are needed, specifically studies that focus on the academic assets and ways of knowing that URM students already possess.

Further, learning how participation in the Bridge Program correlates with connections to on-campus resources and opportunities would be vital to understanding the interconnectedness of programming offices, as well as the necessity of URM students forming on-campus connections

that will advocate for them in other spaces. In that same vein, further research is needed on the impact of a "safe space" for URM students at PWIs. Though a number of studies have explored the impact of cultural affinity centers (Patton, 2006; Sanders, 2014; Strayhorn, Terrell, Redmond, & Walton, 2010; Stovall, 2005) this study underscores the additional challenges for URM students when there is no cultural affinity center on campus, or, institutionally-designated cultural safe space. In this study, the students created a de facto safe space in the Bridge Program office because that physical sense of safety was so essential to their well-being. Further research could explore the features of a cultural "safe space" that allows students to resist the racial battle fatigue that they experience outside of that space. Last, understanding how peer-to-peer networks of URM students can mentor one another in navigating PWIs is a critical finding that is worthy of future study. Oftentimes, URM students enrolling at PWIs experience the culture shock of their own minority status, and if peer-to-peer networks can act as interventions in this case by not only lessening the shock, but providing strategies, this could have a significant impact on the likelihood of URM students persisting.

One limitation of this study is that the relevance of the Bridge Program for 10 URM students was not contrasted with the experiences of URM students at Elmhill College who did not participate in the Bridge Program. A study that would contrast the experiences of URM students at a PWI who were not able or not willing to take advantage of the resource that was the Bridge Program office would provide valuable perspective on how they do or do not feel connected to the campus community at large. It would also provide more context around how they access resources and navigate the campus climate without the Bridge Program to do much of that lift for them. Are they less likely to utilize campus programming? Are they less likely to feel a sense of community or belonging? Had time permitted, this study as a contrast to the

experiences of the URM Bridge Program participants would have added another dimension both to the overall campus racial climate as well as the enduring relevance of the Bridge Program.

Similarly, each year, there are a handful of URM students that complete the Bridge Program, but do not enroll in the school for the fall semester. Given that the goal of this Bridge Program was to facilitate a smoother transition into a PWI for URM students, further research is warranted to understand the experiences of the group of the students who did not complete this transition. What are their experiences? What kept them from enrolling at the university? The information from these studies could provide additional data about ways to improve the Bridge Program structure and programming to better support the student participants. The data from this group would have also provided another dimension to the deficit-oriented narrative that bridge programs serve as "interventions" for URM students (in that they are a necessity to prepare students who are otherwise "academically unprepared"). As these students did not matriculate into Elmhill College, it would be valuable to track their post-secondary outcomes in light of their participation in the Bridge Program. For example, if they took a gap year before enrolling in college elsewhere, did the Bridge Program expose gaps in their academic preparation that they wanted to address? Or, if the Bridge Program serves as a "soft launch" into college, did their participation in a pre-college preparatory program result in the realization that they did not want to pursue higher education? Future research that seeks interviews and other forms of data collection with this population of students could deepen an understanding of the purpose and relevance of pre-college bridge programs.

Another area for future research addresses this study's limitation with timing. This study would have been enhanced if it were a longitudinal study. Research question 1 in particular, which asks students to reflect on the *enduring relevance* of the Bridge Program, implies the

temporality of relevance and acknowledges how it shifts and evolves. However, the study itself captures a moment in time for the students, and the study would be enhanced if it was able to show how that concept of enduring relevance evolves for the students over more time. Future research could ask the Bridge Program participants about enduring relevance over a span of years in order to compare how different facets of the program are, or are not, more or less relevant in different seasons of their lives.

This study adds to the small, but growing, body of research that center CRT composite counterstories. CCSs are still a somewhat new area of research, as the inherently creative process of crafting a CCS can create the assumption that the methodology is prone to researcher bias and is therefore not valid or rigorous. This reinforces the false binary that creative qualitative methodologies that rely on story-telling cannot be academically rigorous, which belies positivist assumptions about knowledge and 'truth'. There is a call for research that foregrounds the critical stance in education, or a way of looking at knowledge production that critiques the intersection of power dynamics, systems of oppression, and the value of particular *kinds* of knowledge. Future studies on the experiences of URM students at PWIs should use emancipatory methodologies like CCSs that uplift and amplify the voices of these students. As more research studies use CCSs, the process of creating these CCSs may be demystified in a way where they are seen as more academically 'legitimate' pieces of scholarship.

To that end, this study also adds to existing literature on CRT in education, especially as it relates to the experiences of resistance and contradiction at PWIs, as well as an understanding of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). This body of research is urgent and necessary; the country is in the midst of a racial reckoning, and White-identified folks are beginning to understand the interconnectedness, insidiousness, and pervasiveness of systemic racism. What is

at stake is not just the validating of the experiences of 10 URM students who participated in a Bridge Program that facilitated their development of community cultural wealth to persist at PWI. Educational research must demand more studies that amplify the voices of URM students and illuminate their experiences in order to propose socially just and emancipatory change in higher education systems.

Finally, this study calls attention to the need for more theoretical and methodological studies on the role of White-identified researchers in leading and conducting CRT research. While there is critical scholarship that wrestles with the moral and methodological implications of doing cross-cultural research, the question of "What is the role of White people in doing research that centers communities of color?" warrants further exploration. In particular, one could argue that it is appropriation for White researchers to utilize methodologies that were *designed* by people of color in order to conduct emancipatory research that *uplifts* people of color. Conversely, there is a call for greater numbers of researchers to utilize CRT frameworks to critique racism in education, regardless of the racial identities of the researchers – a *"the more, the merrier*" approach. I believe in the latter, but I also think that this requires incredible sensitivity and reflexivity on behalf of the White researcher to ensure that their research is not exploitative of communities of color.

LIMITATIONS

As stated above, one of the most challenging limitations of this study was the limitation of time. The question of *enduring relevance* would have been more nuanced had I been able to conduct data collection over a period of several years, as I would have been able to explore how the students' perceptions shifted as time passed. If I had been able to interview URM students at

Elmhill College who did not participate in the Bridge Program, it would have given far greater understanding into the myriad functions that the Bridge Program serves, as well as given more context to the overall campus racial climate. Furthermore, a survey issued to all students that sought to explore the campus racial climate might have grounded the experiences of the Bridge Program participants within a larger understanding of how other students perceive race and racism on campus. Finally, time limitations made it impossible for me to complete participant observations of the Bridge Program itself during the summer, which would have also allowed me to understand more fully the events and programs that the students described in their interviews.

Another limitation is the role and positionality of the researcher. I identify as a White woman, and this indubitably influenced the ways in which URM students responded to my questions. There is no way of knowing how much this impacted their responses and what they shared with me, but without question, a URM student speaking on White supremacy and racism at a PWI might couch their answers differently when relaying these experiences to a White woman. As much as I tried to ask interview questions that encouraged frank and honest answers, my own racial identity influenced the tenor of the answers that the students gave, and there is the possibility that they might have been more candid about their experiences with racism had I been a racial minority.

Finally, I faced was the impact of COVID-19 on my ability to conduct member checks with the students. COVID-19 occurred approximately when I began data analysis, and Elmhill College shut down very quickly. The Bridge Program director shared that many things were up in the air and the students were having a tough time. It did not seem appropriate at this point to reach out for member checks. Without question, member checks with the 10 URM students would have enhanced the trustworthiness of the narrative data.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this dissertation was to understand the impact of a Bridge Program for 10 URM students at a small suburban PWI. The students participated in interviews and focus groups with the intent to understand the *enduring relevance* of the Bridge Program as they move into and through their undergraduate experiences. This dissertation also explored their experiences within the greater context of the campus racial climate at this PWI. The dissertation explored strategies of resistance to address racialized challenges and contradictions (as experienced by the URM students at their PWI through a CRT lens.

This study adds to the body of literature on impactful programming that can support URM students at four-year PWIs, and in particular, the ways in which purposeful programming can facilitate resilience, self-confidence, and cultural capital that facilitates their persistence through their undergraduate experience. This study also provides additional context around the racialized experiences of URM students at PWIs. In the narratives of the 10 URM students, the field of education gains a greater understanding of programmatic support that purposely supports and affirms these students' lived experiences. We understand that their resilience and persistence at a PWI, which often results in psychological harm on the students because of its racial campus climate, is bolstered in part by the efficacy of the Bridge Program.

APPENDIX

INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Pre-Interview Script

I'd like to thank you for your willingness to participate in this interview. As I mentioned to you before, my study seeks to understand the enduring relevance of your experience in the Bridge Program, as well as your broader experiences as a URM student at Elmhill College. I want to understand your experiences as someone who comes from an underrepresented minoritized background, and how you make meaning of this experience as an undergraduate student. This is meant to be a conversation, so I may ask follow-up questions for clarification. *[review aspects of consent form]* Previously, you completed a consent form indicating that I have your permission to audio record and video record our conversation. Are you still okay with me recording our conversation today?

Individual Semi-structured Interview (~90 Minutes)

Guiding Questions (Ice-breakers): *Tell me about yourself.*

1. What's your major?
2. What classes are you taking right now?
3. What do you do for fun?
4. Tell me about where you grew up.
5. What were you like as a child?
6. What was your family like?
7. How do you identify racially?

Guiding Question: *What has college been like for you?*

1. Tell me about a time in your past when you really enjoyed college.
2. Tell me about a time in your past when you hated college.

Guiding Question: *What was your experience in the Bridge Program?*

1. How did you end up at Elmhill College and how did you find out about the Bridge Program?
2. Can you tell me about some of the relationships that you formed when you participated in the Bridge Program?
3. What were some of the conversations about campus racial climate like during the Bridge Program?
4. Can you tell me about other experiences that you had in the Bridge Program? Did anything surprise you about the program? If so, what?

Guiding Question: *How has the Bridge Program shaped your experience at Elmhill College?*

1. Tell me about the ways in which the Bridge Program has impacted your academic preparation, if at all?
2. Tell me about a time that you felt really successful academically.
3. Tell me about the ways in which the Bridge Program impacted your sense of community.
4. Can you tell me about a time that you felt really connected to the community here? What about a time that you felt disconnected?
5. Are there opportunities that have opened up to you as a part of being in the Bridge Program?
6. In what ways has the Bridge Program helped you to navigate Elmhill College?
7. In what ways has the Bridge Program been unsuccessful in helping you navigate Elmhill College?

Guiding Question: *What is your experience with race at Elmhill College?*

8. What do you think about the racial climate at Elmhill College?
9. Can you tell me how your experience in the Bridge Program intersects with your racial identity?
10. How does it feel to be a student at a predominantly White institution?
11. Can you tell me about a time when you "resisted"? What did that look like?

FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Pre-Focus Group Script

I'd like to thank you once again for being willing to participate in this focus group, which should last for about ninety minutes. As you know, my study seeks to understand the enduring relevance of your unique experiences in the Bridge Program, as well as your broader experiences as a URM student at Elmhill College. This is meant to be a free-flowing conversation, and I encourage you to listen to each other's responses. It is acceptable to disagree with each other, but please do so respectfully. There are no "right answers" to these questions, as these are your own views and life experiences. In conversations with a group of people, it's common for one or two people dominate so, I ask that you monitor your own participation and are mindful of equity in participation in the conversation. I want you to know in advance that I may ask follow-up questions for clarification, but unlike our individual interview, I will not be as active in guiding the conversation. *[review aspects of consent form]* Previously, you completed a consent form indicating that I have your permission to audio record our conversation as well as take handwritten notes. Are you still okay with me recording our conversation today?

Focus Group Questions:

Guiding Question (Ice Breaker): *Could each of you please introduce yourself and share your major? Could each of you please share a fact about yourself?*

Guiding Question: *What are your perceptions of the campus racial climate at Elmhill College?*

3. Have you experienced racism at Elmhill College? Would you mind sharing that experience with us?
4. Do you think the campus is supportive of your racial identities? Why or why not?
5. Can you share about a time that you experienced contradiction at Elmhill College?
6. What does the term "resistance" mean to you personally?

Guiding Question: *How was the Bridge Program been relevant to your experience at Elmhill College?*

7. What does it mean to you to have been admitted to Elmhill College through the Bridge Program?
8. In what ways has the Bridge Program helped you to navigate Elmhill College?
9. In what ways has the Bridge Program been unsuccessful in helping you navigate Elmhill College?

DIRECTOR INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Pre-Interview Script

I'd like to thank you for your willingness to talk to me about the history of the Bridge Program. As I mentioned to you before, my study seeks to understand the enduring relevance of the Bridge Program for URM students, as well as their broader experiences at Elmhill College I'm hoping to get a better understanding of the Bridge Program from your perspective, including its history,

mission, and day-to-day schedule. Based on your answers to my questions, I may ask follow-up questions to get more information.

Individual Semi-structured Interview (~45 Minutes)

1. Can you tell me more about the history of the Bridge Program?
2. Can you tell me about the relationship between the Bridge Program and the Admissions Office? Tell me about the ways that Admissions and the Bridge Program work together to select a candidate for the Bridge Program.
3. Can you tell me about the day-to-day activities during the Bridge Program?
4. What are the most successful activities? What are the least successful activities?
5. Can you tell me more about the programming during the year, following the Bridge Program?
6. What do you think makes a successful Bridge Program student?

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07-Nov-2019

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IRB #: 8173
Study: An Exploration of the Enduring Relevance of a Pre-College Summer Bridge Program for Underrepresented Minoritized Students
Approval Date: 06-Nov-2019

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research (IRB) has reviewed and approved the protocol for your study as Expedited as described in Title 45, Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Part 46, Subsection 1101(b). Approval is granted to conduct your study as described in your protocol.

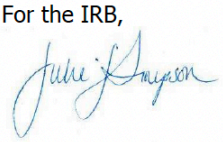
Researchers who conduct studies involving human subjects have responsibilities as outlined in the attached document, *Responsibilities of Directors of Research Studies Involving Human Subjects*. (This document is also available at http://unh.edu/research/irb-application-resources.) Please read this document carefully before commencing your work involving human subjects.

Note: IRB approval is separate from UNH Purchasing approval of any proposed methods of paying study participants. Before making any payments to study participants, researchers should consult with their BSC or UNH Purchasing to ensure they are complying with institutional requirements. If such institutional requirements are not consistent with the confidentiality or anonymity assurances in the IRB-approved protocol and consent documents, the researcher may need to request a modification from the IRB.

Upon completion of your study, please complete the enclosed Study Final Report form and return it to this office along with a report of your findings.

If you have questions or concerns about your study or this approval, please feel free to contact Melissa McGee at 603-862-2005 or melissa.mcgee@unh.edu. Please refer to the IRB # above in all correspondence related to this study. The IRB wishes you success with your research.

For the IRB,



Julie F. Simpson
Director

cc: File
Hambacher, Elyse

University *of* New Hampshire

Research Integrity Services, Service Building
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14-Nov-2019

Slater, Kathryn
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IRB #: 8173
Study: An Exploration of the Enduring Relevance of a Pre-College Summer Bridge Program for Underrepresented Minoritized Students
Modification Approval Date: 14-Nov-2019
Modification: Updated Research Site

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research (IRB) has reviewed and approved your modification to this study, as indicated above. Further changes in your study must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval prior to implementation.

Researchers who conduct studies involving human subjects have responsibilities as outlined in the document, *Responsibilities of Directors of Research Studies Involving Human Subjects.* This document is available at http://unh.edu/research/irb-application-resources or from me.

Note: IRB approval is separate from UNH Purchasing approval of any proposed methods of paying study participants. Before making any payments to study participants, researchers should consult with their BSC or UNH Purchasing to ensure they are complying with institutional requirements. If such institutional requirements are not consistent with the confidentiality or anonymity assurances in the IRB-approved protocol and consent documents, the researcher may need to request a modification from the IRB.

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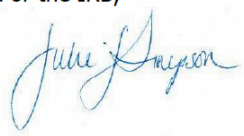
For the IRB,



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